



# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

The group Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad, known the world over as Boko Haram, is an extremist Islamic sect in Nigeria that has created havoc across the north of the country and in the capital, Abuja. Its violent attacks on government offices, the United Nations, and churches threaten to destabilize the country. A range of conflicting narratives has grown up around Boko Haram, and the group's origins, motivations, and future plans remain a matter of debate. This report addresses the questions stemming from these narratives and suggests how the group can be contained. The report is based on the author's extensive research and reporting on Boko Haram. In March 2011, he conducted an interview with a senior member of the group in the city of Maiduguri, Nigeria, the center of Boko Haram's area of influence. The report also draws on interviews with Nigerian journalists who have covered the group (and who asked to remain anonymous in this report) and on information provided to the author by other researchers working on Boko Haram.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*Andrew Walker*

## What Is Boko Haram?

### Summary

- Boko Haram is an Islamic sect that believes politics in northern Nigeria has been seized by a group of corrupt, false Muslims. It wants to wage a war against them, and the Federal Republic of Nigeria generally, to create a "pure" Islamic state ruled by sharia law.
- Since August 2011 Boko Haram has planted bombs almost weekly in public or in churches in Nigeria's northeast. The group has also broadened its targets to include setting fire to schools. In March 2012, some twelve public schools in Maiduguri were burned down during the night, and as many as 10,000 pupils were forced out of education.
- Boko Haram is not in the same global jihadist bracket as Algeria's al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or Somalia's al-Shabab. Despite its successful attack on the UN compound in Abuja in August 2011, Boko Haram is not bent on attacking Western interests. There have been no further attacks on international interests since that time.
- Following the failed rescue of hostages Chris McManus and Franco Lamolinara in northeastern Nigeria in March 2012, President Goodluck Jonathan played up the connections between the group and international terrorism. However, links between Boko Haram and the kidnapers are questionable.
- It is difficult to see how there can be meaningful dialogue between the government and the group. The group's cell-like structure is open for factions and splits, and there would be no guarantee that someone speaking for the group is speaking for all of the members.
- Tactics employed by government security agencies against Boko Haram have been consistently brutal and counterproductive. Their reliance on extrajudicial execution as a tactic in "dealing" with any problem in Nigeria not only created Boko Haram as it is known today, but also sustains it and gives it fuel to expand.
- The group will continue to attack softer targets in the northeast rather than international targets inside or outside Nigeria. It is also likely to become increasingly involved in the Jos crisis, where it will attack Christian indigenes of the north and try to push them out. Such a move would further threaten to destabilize the country's stability and unity.
- Now that the group has expanded beyond a small number of mosques, radical reforms in policing strategy are necessary if there is to be any progress in countering the group. Wide-spread radical reform of the police is also long overdue throughout Nigeria. As a first step,

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jailing a number of police officers responsible for ordering human rights abuses might go some way to removing a key objection of the group.

## Introduction

Nigeria has had a long and unfortunate history of communal conflicts and ethnoreligious violence. For example, in Plateau state, in Nigeria's "middle belt," there have been many outbreaks of bloody violence between different communities since the return of democracy in 1999. There have also been riots in the urban centers of Kaduna and Kano, and for several decades there has been a simmering conflict in the Tafawa Balewa district of Bauchi.

When viewed from outside, it can appear that these conflicts boil down to religious differences, tensions between blocs of Muslim and Christian inhabitants. When one looks deeper, however, one finds that politics—more precisely, control of government patronage—is the primary cause of many of these conflicts. Election disputes have also led to breakdowns along Muslim and Christian lines, as was seen in the most recent polls in 2011, when youths went on the rampage in southern Kaduna state. When violence erupts in these circumstances, the genesis is usually in one group asserting control of the apparatus of government over another group or groups in a very heterogeneous and ethnically diverse part of Nigeria.

There is also a history of Muslim sects growing in the cities of northern Nigeria. In the 1980s, for example, the Maitatsine sect, which heretically claimed Muhammad was not the messenger of Allah, established itself in the slums of Kano. The sect was wiped out very brutally, with women and children of the sect attacking heavily armed military and police forces with bows and arrows and knives. The group scattered and was fully eliminated over the course of a decade.

A weakness in the institutions of politics and the security services has created a political situation where such threats to stability are not dealt with until violence is a certainty. Only when a politician in control of a state is convinced that such a threat cannot be bent to his advantage will he order any action be taken against it. Such is the weakness of security institutions; their only method of dealing with any such threat is with violence. Boko Haram was created under these circumstances.

Boko Haram is an Islamic sect that believes northern politics has been seized by a group of corrupt, false Muslims. It wants to wage a war against them, and the Federal Republic of Nigeria generally, to create a "pure" Islamic state ruled by sharia law. Since 2009 it has been driven by a desire for vengeance against politicians, police, and Islamic authorities for their role in a brutal suppression of the group that year. But the group has proved itself to be very adaptable, evolving its tactics swiftly and changing its targets at the behest of a charismatic leadership. The group leapt onto the world's agenda in August 2011, when it bombed the United Nations compound in Abuja, killing twenty-three people. Some observers say Boko Haram has reached out to find allies in other global jihadist movements in the Sahel. The speed at which the group developed the capability to produce large and effective improvised explosive devices and enlist suicide bombers to deliver them suggests outside help. But thus far there remains no evidence to say the group's intentions are to confront and attack Western interests inside or outside Nigeria.

A much more likely development is that the group will continue to attack soft civilian targets, widen its war against the influence of corrupt authorities, and include itself in the ongoing conflict in Plateau state. Boko Haram, along with many other groups in northern Nigeria, believes that Plateau governor Jonah Jang is responsible for a campaign of "ethnic cleansing" against Hausa and Fulani people. There have been many outbreaks of violence perpetrated by people on both sides. Recently there has been a spate of suicide attacks on churches, for which Boko Haram is suspected.

If the group escalates its attacks on northern Christians and appropriates the conflict in Plateau, the results could have very serious implications for the unity of the country. The government of Goodluck Jonathan has called on the United States and the United Kingdom to help it in its fight against Boko Haram. But extreme caution must be advised, as what might appear to be a little “local difficulty” might hide a growing rift between north and south.

## The History of Boko Haram

Boko Haram’s origins lie in a group of radical Islamist youth who worshipped at the Alhaji Muhammadu Ndimi Mosque in Maiduguri a decade ago. In 2002, an offshoot of this youth group (not yet known as Boko Haram) declared the city and the Islamic establishment to be intolerably corrupt and irredeemable. The group declared it was embarking on *hijra* (a withdrawal along the lines of the Prophet Muhammad’s withdrawal from Mecca to Medina). It moved from Maiduguri to a village called Kanama, Yobe state, near the border with Niger, to set up a separatist community run on hard-line Islamic principles. Its leader, Mohammed Ali, espoused antistate ideology and called on other Muslims to join the group and return to a life under “true” Islamic law, with the aim of making a more perfect society away from the corrupt establishment. In December 2003, following a community dispute regarding fishing rights in a local pond, the group got into a conflict with the police. Group members overpowered a squad of officers and took their weapons. This confrontation led to a siege of its mosque by the army that lasted into the New Year. The siege ended in a shootout in which most of the group’s seventy members were killed, including Mohammed Ali.

The group had gained press attention in Nigeria, and interest from the U.S. Embassy, because of the catchy name locals had given it: the Nigerian Taliban. It also caught the attention of the Nigerian media because many of the group’s members were the sons of wealthy and influential people in Nigeria’s northern establishment. They were perhaps not all from the very highest circle of Nigerian society, but one was alleged to have been the son of then Yobe governor Bukar Abba Ibrahim. In a 2004 U.S. State Department cable, revealed by Wikileaks, the U.S. embassy in Abuja concluded the group did not present an international threat and likely had no links to international jihadist organizations.

The few survivors of the “Nigerian Taliban” returned to Maiduguri, where they settled back with others from the youth group that had originated at the Ndimi mosque. The leader of this Maiduguri group, Mohammed Yusuf, then embarked on the process of establishing the group’s own mosque in Maiduguri. This new mosque, named the Ibn Taimiyyah Masjid, was built on land to the north of the center of town, near the railway station, owned by Yusuf’s father-in-law, Baba Fugu Mohammed. The group was apparently left alone by the authorities, and it expanded into other states, including Bauchi, Yobe, and Niger state. The group’s neighbors in Maiduguri dubbed the group Boko Haram, which roughly translates as “Western education is forbidden” in Hausa.

Observers say the group constructed a “state within a state,” with a cabinet, its own religious police, and a large farm. It attracted more and more people under its roof by offering welfare handouts, food, and shelter. Many of the people the group attracted were refugees from the wars over the border in Chad and jobless Nigerian youths. The source of the group’s money at this stage of its existence is not clear. Members of the Borno religious establishment say that Yusuf received funds from Salafist contacts in Saudi Arabia following two hajj trips that Yusuf made during this time. Another possible source of funding during this period was donations from wealthy northern Nigerians. In 2006, a wealthy northern businessman was arrested by the State Security Services after a group of children alleged that they had been sent by the group to an al-Qaeda training camp in Mauritania. The businessman says

his donations to the group were an innocent attempt to contribute *zakat*, an obligation of wealthy Muslims to give charitably.

On the eve of the 2007 presidential elections, Sheikh Ja'afar Mahmoud Adam, a prominent, popular cleric and regular preacher at the Ndimi mosque in Maiduguri, was assassinated as he was praying at the mosque he administered in Kano. The killing was a mystery for some time, but it is now acknowledged that it was carried out on the orders of Mohammed Yusuf. Sheikh Ja'afar had begun to criticize the group for its hard-line ideology, predicting a clash with the state. The killing is now seen by some as a key point in the development of Boko Haram, because there was no longer the possibility of turning Yusuf and his followers back to the mainstream of the northern Islamic establishment.

Much bloodier events soon followed. In July 2009 the group came into conflict with the authorities in a strikingly similar way to the events of six years before. Traveling en masse to the funeral of a fellow member, the group was stopped by police traffic officers, who were enforcing a tightened restriction on motorcycle helmets, and an argument ensued. The circumstances are unclear, but a member of the group is reported to have fired on the police, injuring several officers. The group then attacked police stations in Bauchi and Yobe, killing scores of police officers. Yusuf released several video sermons in which he explicitly threatened the state and the police with violence. They were circulated on DVD and gained a widespread audience.

These events led the Bauchi government to crack down on the group, arresting more than seven hundred members. In Maiduguri, the police surrounded the group's mosque, but members of the sect managed to break out and for three days they had the run of the town. They roamed the city acting independently, fighting police when they came across them and killing Muslim and Christian civilians indiscriminately.

The police eventually regained control of Maiduguri, and then embarked on a bloody purge of the group's members and anyone they suspected of being a Boko Haram supporter or sympathizer. Dozens of people were rounded up and executed without trial, including Yusuf's father-in-law. Mohammed Yusuf was arrested by the army and handed over to the police, who killed him within hours. Police officials denied that he had been executed, saying he had been shot while trying to escape. Videos clearly showing the execution of young boys and other alleged Boko Haram members by the police, including Buji Foi, a former commissioner for religious affairs in the state government, have been posted on YouTube. Those members of the group who were not killed or arrested fled, some say out of Nigeria. They entered another incarnation, that of famous Islamists on the run.

After these events, the police and the army began to take information from traditional rulers and imams in Maiduguri about people suspected to be members or sympathizers of Boko Haram. If these people had fled, their property was confiscated and parceled out to the traditional leaders to keep or give to their supporters. An unknown number of people were denounced at this time and later disappeared, presumed executed by the police. A local journalist in Maiduguri believes the number of people who have disappeared in this way could be more than one hundred. The police deny such accusations.

Little is known about where the members of Boko Haram who fled Maiduguri went during this 2009–10 period. But the group's uprising undoubtedly brought its members to the attention of global jihadist movements and rebel groups based around the Sahel. Nigeria-based security sources told Reuters in January 2012 that they had tracked "several dozen" Nigerians to insurgent training camps in Algeria during this time. Sources told this author that this information was based on reports from human intelligence assets in such camps. The UN Security Council says that Boko Haram members received training in a Tuareg rebel camp in Mali. The foreign minister of Niger told reporters that Nigerians have been trained in rebel camps "across the Sahel region." It is believed that the group's

leadership, including Abubakar Shekau, Mohammed Yusuf's right-hand man, relocated to a hideout in northern Cameroon.

Sometime in mid-2010 Boko Haram returned to Maiduguri and started a campaign of assassinations. This campaign began with hit-and-run attacks against police checkpoints in Borno and Yobe. The group's favored method was to do so on a motorcycle, whereby the pillion rider would kill the police officers and seize their weapons. Gunmen also forced their way into the homes of local leaders who had cooperated with the police by naming Boko Haram members. The people who had taken over houses formerly belonging to escaped Boko Haram members were also killed if they refused to leave.

On Christmas Eve 2010 as many as half a dozen bombs were detonated near churches and a market in two districts of Jos, Plateau state, killing scores of people. At the time it was not assumed to be a Boko Haram attack; it was thought to be a nasty twist to the long-standing ethno-political conflict there. Then, on New Year's Eve 2010 a bomb was detonated in a popular open-air fish restaurant and market inside the grounds of the Mogadishu barracks, just outside Abuja, killing ten. While it sits very close to a military barracks, the market was frequented mostly by civilians and was relatively loosely protected. Initially it was not certain that either bombing had been carried out by Boko Haram. There had been a bombing three months before at a ceremony in Abuja marking the fiftieth anniversary of the country's independence for which Boko Haram was not implicated. (A leader of the Niger Delta militant organization the Movement for the emancipation of the Niger Delta [MEND], in custody in South Africa, faces charges of planning that attack.) But in early 2011 an FBI investigation concluded that the Mogadishu barracks bomb was constructed using the same techniques as devices in Jos, and suspicion fell on Boko Haram. These attacks showed the group was prepared to strike vulnerable spots and cause civilian casualties. It launched its bombing campaign in the already tense city of Jos, and it showed the authorities it was able to reach them in Abuja.

During the first few months of 2011, the group's targets for assassination operations in Maiduguri widened beyond the original focus of police and other authorities. In February 2011, for example, a pharmacist in Maiduguri—not believed to have had any previous connection to the group's treatment by the police—was murdered in a robbery neighbors attributed to Boko Haram. Cash and a large amount of medical supplies were taken from his shop. A senior member of the group who identified himself as "Abu Dujana" told this author in an interview that anyone whom the group declared an "enemy" would be killed, though he could not say what the pharmacist had done. Abu Dujana also reported that the group had not ruled out the use of suicide bombers in its attacks.

The group began to rob banks, cash-in-transit convoys, and successful businesses, not only in Maiduguri but also in Bauchi, where the group remains strong. The group claims it is permitted to do this by the Quran, as the money it takes is considered to be the "spoils of war." A source who has followed the group closely states that the group is thought to have made approximately 500 million naira (about \$3 million, or £2 million) from such robberies, but such claims are unverifiable.

In June 2011 Boko Haram bombed the national police headquarters in Abuja. A car laden with explosives drove into the compound of Louis Edet House, a block of offices previously thought secure in Abuja's government zone, by following a convoy of senior officers through the gates. It is believed the driver aimed to put the car near the entrance stairway as the senior officers entered, but he was directed around the back of the building by guards, where the bomb detonated in the car park.

At the time it was questioned whether the bombing was meant to be a suicide attack, because it was possible that the bomber had been delayed in Abuja traffic, but in August 2011 remaining doubts were removed when a man drove a car into the UN compound in



***The attack [on the UN compound] launched Boko Haram onto world news and established it as a militant group with the technical, and doctrinal, capacity to produce suicide bombs.***

Abuja and detonated a massive bomb, killing twenty-three people and wounding scores more. The attack launched Boko Haram onto world news and established it as a militant group with the technical, and doctrinal, capacity to produce suicide bombs. The organization released a martyrdom video made by the driver of the car.

Security intelligence analysts at Stratfor say building successful suicide weapons, like the ones used at the United Nations and at police headquarters, is very difficult. To perform two successful detonations is good evidence that there is a foreign hand involved in training Boko Haram, they say. The type of explosives the group uses are common in mining and construction, according to Reuters. There are plenty of sources of such explosives in northern Nigeria.

The way the group contacted the outside world also changed about this time. A journalist colleague in Nigeria says the group tightened its telephone discipline, collecting the numbers of journalists it wanted to contact, rather than having journalists call contacts they had made in the organization. A Boko Haram spokesman with the nom de guerre of "Abu Qaqa" began contacting journalists to claim attacks. The government later claimed that it had captured him, but Boko Haram says that another member had been captured and that Qaqa is still active. The purported leader of the group, Abubakar Shekau, Yusuf's former right-hand man, also began to post videos to YouTube at this time.

Since August 2011 there have been almost weekly attacks by militants planting bombs in public or in churches in Nigeria's northeast. The group has also broadened its targets, away from direct revenge attacks on the state to include other representations of authority. This expansion includes setting fire to schools and attacking newspaper offices. In March 2012, some twelve public schools in Maiduguri were burned down during the night, with as many as 10,000 pupils forced out of education. Three alleged members of Boko Haram were killed while trying to set light to a school, reports say. The group has told journalists that these attacks are in retaliation for the arrests of a number of Islamic teachers from traditional "Tsangaya" Quranic schools in Maiduguri. In the Tsangaya system of schools, clerics teach children to memorize the Quran. These schools, some with only a few children, some very large, operate not only in Nigeria but also across the whole of the Sahel. The children, known as Almajiris, come to the city from the countryside. Many beg during the day and give their money to the teacher, or *mallam*, who runs the school. The group also says that it is attacking the government school system in retaliation for what it says is the government's attack on the Tsangaya system as a whole.

There has also been an increase in reports of people being beheaded in public by Boko Haram. It is believed that these might be internal purges of moderate members, or members in the group who have been arrested and can therefore no longer be trusted.

Big attacks have included bombings on Christmas Day 2011, when bombs were detonated in three states, Niger, Plateau, and Yobe, killing forty-five people. In January 2012 three groups of gunmen and suicide bombers coordinated attacks on three government buildings in Kano—the police headquarters, the office of the immigration service, and the State Security Service. More than two hundred people were killed.

The group has also continued its involvement in the long-standing conflict between indigenous groups and Hausa/Fulani "settlers" in Plateau state. Most of the violence in the area has not had a connection to Boko Haram, but in February 2012 a suicide car bomb was detonated at a Jos church. Days later, in March, another suicide bomb was detonated outside St. Finbar's church in Rayfield, Jos, near the government house. Nineteen people have been killed so far in retaliatory tit-for-tat attacks immediately following those bombings.

More recently, there have been deadly bomb and gun attacks on the offices of *This Day* newspaper in Abuja and Kaduna, the Catholic chapel in Bayero University Kano, and a cattle market in Yobe. Dozens were killed in each attack.

## The Challenge of Defining Boko Haram

In interviews before his death, Mohammed Yusuf told the BBC Hausa Service he believed the earth was flat and that rain was not caused by evaporation from the ground. Such statements have led to widespread derision of the group and a resistance to taking it seriously enough to examine its aims. The name Boko Haram has also become a barrier to people's understandings of the group's motives (it is used throughout this report only because it is shorter and better known than its proper name). In fact, the name was really a succinct critique and implied rejection of Yusuf's teachings. "Boko Haram," rather than a distillation of the group's core beliefs, was a name given to the group by dismissive neighbors who had not joined the sect and had no time for it. It was as if they were saying "those people who go on and on about Western education being a sin." Boko Haram, as a group, clearly does not utterly reject the modern world out of hand. The group's use of mobile phones, video cameras, DVDs, YouTube, chemical explosives, automatic weapons, and cars shows it is more than prepared to use the fruits of Western education when it suits them. Boko Haram is, however, against those in northern Nigeria known as "*yan boko*." Yan boko is literally translated as "child of the book." It refers to the elite created by the policy of indirect rule used by the British to colonize Nigeria—the people who have had their heads turned away from Allah by easy money and corrupting Western values. To be yan boko is to be spiritually and morally corrupt, lacking in religious piety, and guilty of criminally enriching oneself rather than dedicating oneself to the Muslim *umma* (community).

There are many barriers to understanding the group. So little information about the organization can be verified, and solid, dependable information in general is hard to come by in Nigeria. Naturally, questions have been raised about what it has and has not done. Many possible sources of information are unreliable. The Nigerian police are often led by corrupt or incompetent officers who fight for their own fiefdom rather than work together. Because of this the police rarely provide useful information to the public. Boko Haram too does not have an incentive to give reliable or accurate information on attacks it has carried out, or about the group more generally. Boko Haram has denied shootings and bombings that fit its pattern of activity. There are some attacks ascribed to Boko Haram that could easily be the work of armed robbers operating under the mask of the group. Political rivals could also be using the cover of Boko Haram to settle scores and carry out assassinations. In one example, a failed bombing in March 2012 of a church in Bauchi was said by the police to have been plotted by a rival Christian organization. Had the bombing gone to plan, it is easy to see how the attack would have been blamed on Boko Haram.

The security services' inability to deal with Boko Haram in any meaningful way has highlighted the extreme weakness in its capacity to carry out investigations. This weakness is undoubtedly open for exploitation by criminals and criminal politicians alike. Any attack that happens within this state of institutional weakness could be ascribed to "Boko Haram."

Understanding of the group has not been helped by the nature of Nigerian politics. For example, in January 2012 President Goodluck Jonathan announced that Boko Haram had infiltrated the highest levels of politics and the military. The president painted a picture of a puppet group that was being used by aggrieved northern politicians to bring down his southern government. A serving senator accused of having connections with the group was arrested. But President Jonathan's remarks have been condemned by some observers as political opportunism. In Nigerian politics it is a standard maneuver to blame problems on one's political enemies, even if the situation has nothing to do with them. The president's announcement may have had more to do with distracting Nigerians away from painful increases he was about to make in the price of fuel than to actual truth, observers say.

In reality, connections between the core group of Yusuf's followers and established northern elites or politicians today are unlikely. A local journalist who has followed the group for years says attempts to present Boko Haram as a puppet organization of the northern elite are "absurd." It is certainly difficult to see how any northern politician, or his or her representatives, could interact with Boko Haram at this stage. It is as likely that the group would kill them—as *yan boko*—as do their bidding. Of course there are those individuals within the northern elite who will certainly seek to exploit the actions of Boko Haram for their own purposes. But opportunistically using events as they happen is not the same as directing them.

Following the failed rescue of hostages Chris McManus and Franco Lamolinara in March 2012, President Jonathan shifted his analysis of the group, playing up the connections between the group and international terrorism. He reportedly wrote to the British and Italian governments: "The Nigerian Government remains resolutely committed to facing up squarely to the challenge of terrorism on our shores and in the international community." His language was carefully chosen to downplay the local politics and to not contradict any possible connection between Boko Haram and al-Qaeda. In this letter, he reportedly also suggested the "ties between our three nations [should] grow deeper." Observers believe this to be a thinly veiled request for money from the Europeans. Richard Dowden, head of the Royal Africa Society, has suggested the failed raid on the Sokoto kidnappers is a good opportunity for Jonathan to bring on new streams of finance for his very costly security plans at a time when his own budget is under severe constraint.

All this uncertainty cannot be taken to mean that a violent group made up of followers and sympathizers of Mohammed Yusuf, calling itself Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad, does not exist. A source who has followed the group in Maiduguri since 2007 told this author that the core group has evolved into a cell-like organization, run by a thirty-member Shura Council. He could not say where the council members were located but suggested that they were not all in one place. Council members are able to travel into and around Nigeria, and they use mobile phones to communicate, meeting face-to-face less often. Each member of the council is responsible for a cell, and each cell is focused on a different task or geographical area. Someone on the lowest level of the cell might not know another member of similar rank in the organization. This source says that most of the group's actions are agreed at the council level but that leader Abubakar Shekau also takes decisions without referring them to the council.

Raufu Mustapha of Oxford University's Department for International Development is working to clarify the situation surrounding Boko Haram. He says that anyone who doubts that a single group is operating in northern Nigeria is "in denial." He points out that throughout its existence, the organization has constantly morphed and changed its nature as it has gone through various incarnations. This evolution has made it difficult for observers to pin the organization down and define it. Clarity has been obscured because contact with the organization is difficult. When there has been contact with the outside world, the organization has proved elliptical. It has made announcements about its goals that are contradictory, not really achievable, or unrealistic. The water has been muddied further by the number of interpretations of motive and causation that observers attribute to anything that happens in Nigeria, and the conspiracy theories that flow from them.

In interviews before his death, Mohammed Yusuf said the purpose of the organization was to withdraw from a society that had become corrupt and beyond help. His group would then set up a new society whose sole purpose was to be close to Allah. From that purpose prosperity and success would naturally flow, and his righteous group would eventually take over mainstream society. Where "Western" society had gone wrong, Yusuf said, was in deviating from the principles of sharia. For this vision of the world Yusuf drew on his



interpretation of thirteenth-century scholar Ibn Taymiyyah. Taymiyyah, much cited by Salafist radicals, advocated that in the face of leadership by Muslims who did not behave in a benevolent way and used their leadership to oppress, it was acceptable to Allah for individuals to withdraw from that corrupt system and fight it with violence.

John Campbell, a former U.S. ambassador to Nigeria and a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, thinks Boko Haram is several things at once. Boko Haram “writ large” is a movement of grassroots anger among northern people at the continuing deprivation and poverty in the north, he says. It is also a core group of Mohammed Yusuf’s followers who have reconvened around Abubakar Shekau and who are exacting revenge against the state for their treatment. Campbell says there is another aspect to the group that is often overlooked. The group could also be seen as a kind of personality cult, an Islamic millenarianist sect, inspired by a heretical but charismatic preacher.

This view is supported by the author’s own contact with the group. “Abu Dujana,” a senior member, related in great length how he was captivated by Mohammed Yusuf’s teachings. He said that more than anything else, it was what Yusuf revealed to him about the Quran that convinced him to throw in his lot with the group, give up his job, and bring his family to live in the mosque. It was loyalty to Mohammed Yusuf that kept him with the group after Yusuf’s murder, during a difficult and prolonged period on the run with his family.

Although the group’s modus operandi has changed over time, its “big idea” from 2002 has not changed. Like Mohammed Yusuf, the current leaders of the sect want to set up a state-like organization, operating initially on a small scale, parallel to the federal government. They believe this organization would inevitably grow and grow until it would replace the actual state. Where its members operated unchallenged between 2002 and 2003, the group aimed in that direction. They built on this in the years in Maiduguri, with the group growing to the point where it had many “state-like” functions, such as providing welfare handouts, job training, jobs in mini-industries, resources for the rest of the community, and a “moral police” along the same lines as the Hisbah religious police in Kano. These functions have continued in the period of conflict since 2009. Mustapha has observed that the money Boko Haram steals is first used to pay off the widows of slain members, which this author believes to be an aspiring state-like function.

Many academics interested in Boko Haram are reluctant to place the organization within the same global jihadist bracket as Algeria’s al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or Somalia’s al Shabab. When the situation is viewed in the terms outlined in this report, the distinction between Boko Haram and al-Qaeda, which is bent on attacking Western interests, is clear. In this analysis, the attack on the UN compound can be thought of as an outlier event, an anomaly outside the normal concerns of the group that can be accounted for in one of two ways. It was either a trade-off for help the group received in its period of crisis in 2009, or it was intended to embarrass the Nigerian government. There have been no further attacks on international interests since August 2011.

Mustapha says, “When al-Qaeda talks about the advances their allies have made in Africa, they mostly talk about al Shabab, not Boko Haram.” Branding Boko Haram as an international terrorist group with the same anti-West aims as al-Qaeda will not solve the problem, Campbell believes. He says the narrative being built up around the group, especially by the British government in the aftermath of the failed rescue attempt of hostages Chris McManus and Franco Lamolinara in March 2012—that the group is a radical terrorist organization with links to the outside bent on the overthrow of a friendly government and hostile to Western interests—is unhelpful. “The facts don’t support this assertion,” he says. This is especially true if the policy recommendations that flow from this view include aid to the Nigerian security services to wipe out the followers of Mohammed Yusuf. Campbell says such assistance will not deal with the grassroots anger, and may cause the

***Boko Haram . . . could also be seen as a kind of personality cult, an Islamic millenarianist sect, inspired by a heretical but charismatic preacher.***

group to widen its targets to include the citizens of outside nations who aid the Nigerian security services.

At present, Boko Haram's aspirations present more of a threat to Muslim civilians in northern Nigeria—by far the biggest demographic suffering currently from attacks—and to Christian minorities in the north, including economic migrants and indigenous groups, than to international interests.

## The Kidnapping of Chris McManus and Franco Lamolinara

In May 2011 a group of gunmen raided the compound of an Italian construction company B Stablini in Birnin Kebbi, in Nigeria's remote northwest, near the border with Niger. The gunmen seized Franco Lamolinara and Chris McManus. They were held by the group for ten months. During this time two videos were released, one in August and another in December, showing the men kneeling before gunmen wearing Sahelian tagelmust-style turbans. Little press attention was given to the video release, presumably on the request of the European negotiators. Only one agency released the August video, and it was released without sound. In March 2012 a rescue bid was launched. Nigerian troops, apparently working with UK Special Forces, raided a compound in Sokoto city. After the raid it emerged that the hostages had been killed by their captors before the raid began.

It also emerged that a down payment of £1 million, raised by the kidnapped men's families, had been paid. Negotiations were apparently continuing through a Mauritanian cleric intermediary. The ill-fated raid followed the capture of the kidnapper's leader, Abu Mohammed, by the Nigerian security services in Zaria, Kaduna state. During the capture, an accomplice managed to escape, necessitating the raid on the Sokoto compound. Abu Mohammed was apparently wounded in the capture and died in custody.

Straight after the failed raid in Sokoto, the Nigerian government blamed Boko Haram for the kidnapping. In public statements, British prime minister David Cameron said that "terrorists" were responsible. British security service sources, in briefing London-based journalists, said that the group responsible for the kidnapping was connected to Boko Haram. This line shifted as more information came out about the raid, with reports saying the kidnappers were "an offshoot" or a splinter group of Boko Haram with links to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

In the weeks following the raid, questions about the Nigerian and British governments' version of events surfaced. London-based journalists, reporting their briefings with security sources, said that the raid had been a swift "Brits-in-first" operation. Almost simultaneously Nigerian reporters from the BBC's Africa and Hausa service were reporting from the scene that the raid had been an eight-hour gun battle and that Nigerian security sources had warned local residents they were coming. A Nigerian journalist, quoted in Italy's *Corriere Della Sera* and the Britain's *Guardian*, said there had been communication between the Nigerian troops and the kidnappers before the troops went in. Troops reportedly asked the men to release the hostages and only entered after the kidnappers refused.

Just as questions have been raised about the official version of events, questions have also been raised about the kidnappers. The source of funding for the Sokoto group has not been identified, and some observers have doubted whether the group was a part of Boko Haram, an offshoot, or even a splinter group. A local journalist who has followed Boko Haram since before 2009 says he does not recognize Abu Mohammed as being a member of the group's Shura Council. When the men were taken in 2011, their kidnappers telephoned the BBC Hausa service and told them they were looking for money and that they had picked the Europeans simply because they were valuable. Boko Haram's spokesman, "Abu Qaqa," has also denied the group participated in the kidnapping. He told journalists that the group had never taken foreigners hostage or asked for ransoms. A journalist at the BBC Hausa service

told this author, “Boko Haram are all about killing people and robbing banks, not kidnapping. They have decided that it is too much trouble.”

Indeed, there is another possibility. In 2011 there was a spate of kidnappings in Mali and Niger. In January two French citizens were kidnapped in Niamey and were later killed as the kidnapers fought with security services. In November a group of tourists were kidnapped from their hotel in the Malian town of Timbuktu, and in December two geologists were seized from their hotel in Hombori, also in Mali. These kidnappings follow the January 2009 kidnapping of a group of tourists in Gao, Mali. The European governments of most of the hostages allegedly paid ransoms for the return of their citizens, all except the UK government. Edwin Dwyer, the only British member of the tourist group, was murdered later that year.

In all of these cases it is believed that the victims were taken by criminal gangs to be sold to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in Algeria. It is a strong possibility that this is what happened to Chris McManus and Franco Lamolinara. The fact that they were still in Nigeria almost a year after their capture might indicate that the group might have failed to sell its captives and that al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb does not have as wide a reach as sometimes claimed.

## The Prospects of Negotiation with Boko Haram

It is difficult to see how there can be meaningful dialogue between the government and Boko Haram. In March 2012, as this report is being written, a fresh attempt at negotiating a cease-fire from the organization has failed.

There have been overtures toward negotiation in the past that seemed to come from within Boko Haram. In early 2011 a member of the group claiming to be a spokesman called the BBC Hausa service. He said that if the government was to give back the group’s mosques in Maiduguri and Bauchi and allow its members to worship in peace, the group would give up its arms. Shortly afterward the author and a colleague spoke with “Abu Dujana,” and he was very insistent that message did not emanate from the core of the group. After more inquiries by the author’s colleague, he concluded that there had been an internal purge of the group’s more moderate members. In a later telephone call, Abu Dujana stated that “internal divisions have been eliminated.” The author and his colleague took this to mean that the dissenting members had been killed.

In September 2011 the democracy activist Shehu Sani attempted to broker exploratory talks between the former president Olusegun Obasanjo and Mohammed Yusuf’s brother-in-law, Babakura Fugu. Soon after the meeting, gunmen stormed into Fugu’s house—while he was on the telephone to a New York-based Nigerian journalist—and shot him dead. Boko Haram denied the killing, and the assassins have not been identified.

In January 2012 a group claiming to be a moderate breakaway faction of Boko Haram sent a tape to the TV channel the National Television Authority, saying it was ready to negotiate. Four days later half a dozen people were publicly beheaded in Maiduguri by people claiming to be Boko Haram. Mustapha considers these two events to be linked: “When Boko Haram kills their own, they behead them, and reports of beheadings seem to go up when there are talks of negotiation.”

Some of Boko Haram’s stated demands are practically impossible to realize and are often contradictory. For example, it says it wants to break Nigeria in two, north and south, but also that the whole of Nigeria should come under sharia law and convert to Islam. It has also demanded that Goodluck Jonathan should convert to Islam. “These demands can never be met,” says Mustapha.

However, there are other demands that might be up for discussion. The group has demanded the senior members who have been arrested by the government should be

released, all property that has been taken from its members should be restored, and the people responsible for the execution of Mohammed Yusuf and other members of the group should be punished. “These are political demands and could be part of a negotiation,” says Campbell.

It is difficult to see how talks would progress, however. The March attempt was made possible by the appearance of a possible go-between, Ibrahim Datti Ahmed, president of the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria. The attempt failed because he pulled out, surprised at how quickly news of the talks had appeared in the Nigerian newspapers. He accused the government of leaking the news and accused it of acting in bad faith, stating in a press statement that “this development has embarrassed us very much and has created strong doubts in our minds about the sincerity of the Government’s side in our discussion as the discussion is supposed to be very confidential to achieve any success.”

It is also difficult to see how any meaningful negotiation could be carried out with the group itself. The group has on several occasions murdered its own members who have attempted it, and the group’s cell-like structure is open for factions and splits. There would be no guarantee that someone speaking for the group is speaking for all of the members. In Mustapha’s opinion, the prospects for negotiation are dim: “How do you negotiate with a group who has a record of killing people who disagree with them?”

Campbell believes there are five possibilities for the future of the group, some of which are more likely than others. First, it could burn out as a result of internal divisions and casualties in action. Second, it could be crushed by the state. Third, it could evolve into a ministate along the lines put forward in the previous section of this report. Fourth, it could continue smoldering indefinitely. Fifth, under some creative negotiation from the government, the more radical parts of the sect could be isolated and the moderates reintegrated into the mainstream. It remains to be seen which of these futures will be realized, though security sources have told Reuters that the January 2012 Kano attacks were costly to Boko Haram. Many of its gunmen have been killed, and some key figures have apparently been arrested. If the group continues to launch such spectacular attacks, it may very well make it more likely that the group will burn itself out.

## **Nigeria’s Security Tactics against Boko Haram**

***Tactics employed by government security agencies against Boko Haram have been consistently brutal and counterproductive.***

Tactics employed by government security agencies against Boko Haram have been consistently brutal and counterproductive. Their reliance on extrajudicial execution as a tactic in “dealing” with any problem in Nigeria not only created Boko Haram as it is known today, but also sustains it and gives it fuel to expand. The police’s tactics have also made Boko Haram members harder to catch. The people of Maiduguri and Kano are, for the most part, more scared of the police and the army than they are of Boko Haram. Ordinary people would not now go to the police to report suspicious activities in their neighborhoods. Campbell reported that a contact of his encountered preachers loyal to the organization openly gathering people to preach Yusuf’s teachings in the streets of Kano.

Roadblocks set up to prevent militants from moving arms around are quickly turned into opportunities for police to extract bribes. Once in the queue of traffic—which can last hours in some places—drivers dare not turn around for risk of being fired upon. There are frequently shootings by police at major roadblocks. These incidents are very disrupting to normal life but not as dangerous as the way the police actively go after the group. The main technique currently used to fight Boko Haram is mass arrest at the site of attacks. The police round up as many people they can at the site of an attack, often long after gunmen or bombers have fled. Instead of questioning these people, they are intimidated and money is extorted from them. Any information about Boko Haram hideouts they do receive is acted

on in a very heavy-handed way. The police and army descend on the supposed hideout, all guns blazing, with innocent passers-by often caught and killed in the line of fire.

Intelligence gathered by the police is done haphazardly. Virtually the only contact the police have with the community is at the level of the roadblock, with officers casting guilt on those who flee. Other tactics include holding family members of people believed to be members of Boko Haram as hostages. Human Rights Watch has reported that, in cases of extortion outside the Boko Haram context, the police have killed people they have held who were unable to secure money for their release. It is reasonable to suspect the same is happening in northeast Nigeria with respect to families of Boko Haram members.

Oliver Owen, a PhD researcher on the Nigerian police, has said that the only way to improve the situation is to promote fundamental police reforms that incorporate ideas of community policing strategies. Increasing the police's contacts within the community, and making the police more accountable, will enable the police to gather more intelligence about the activities of the group. Reform of the police might also go some way to placating the group itself, but it remains to be seen whether the group can be won over at all, especially having come this far with its militancy.

## Conclusions

Historians of Nigeria, including Murray Last of University College London, point out there is a long history of heretical movements in the Sahel region. These movements seem to erupt in response to political or religious stimuli and can disappear quickly. Some are wiped out by the authorities, like the Maitatsine in the 1980s, while others tear themselves apart in factional fighting. But Boko Haram has arisen at a time when there are two major factors combining to keep it together and in good operating order.

First, the group may have been nurtured from outside. Sources in the Maiduguri religious establishment say it is possible that money from Salafist groups in Saudi Arabia supported it in the early years. It appears that Boko Haram members also received training in rebel camps in the Sahel during a time of crisis for the group.

Second, Boko Haram has grown at a time when there are many national issues that draw anger and feed the group. This includes the continued killing and corruption perpetrated by the police on people connected to the group; the brutal manner in which the police behave to the public at large; the financial corruption of the government; the moral corruption of the religious establishment (as perceived by Boko Haram); a festering conflict in Plateau state; a perceived wider attack on Islam by a government currently led by a Christian president; the end to the "zoning deal" that saw power rotate between north and south; and the terrible political economy, the general poverty, and the poor state of northern Nigeria. It is anger at these issues that sustains the group and gives it recruits to continue its work.

Now that the group has expanded beyond a small number of mosques, radical reforms in policing strategy are necessary if there is to be any progress in gaining intelligence about where—and who—the group is. Indeed, widespread radical reform of the police is long overdue throughout Nigeria. As a first step, jailing a number of police officers responsible for ordering human rights abuses might go some way to removing a key objection of the group. Community policing and a more accountable police force would undoubtedly be a step forward in not just northern Nigeria but also Nigeria as a whole.

However, it should not be expected that such reforms would be enough to persuade the group to give up its arms entirely and to rejoin civil society. Although Boko Haram can be classified as a sect, a radical branch of an established religion trying to advocate a return to a "pure" form of Islam, it also has many attributes of a messianic personality cult. The group has shown it is willing to change its targets and alter its logic of retribution to include

***Boko Haram has grown at a time when there are many national issues that draw anger and feed the group.***



***The only way to remove the threat of the group in the long term is widespread reform of northern Nigeria that improves the livelihoods of northern Nigerians, and gives them a bigger stake in their politics.***

loosely classified “enemies” of the group and civilian targets when the leadership deems it expedient. Its leaders can twist and turn their own justificatory logic to attack anyone they choose without care about innocent passersby. At this stage, it remains to be seen if their anger is something that can be totally placated by reasonable reforms. It is much more likely that they will simply twist their logic again and find other grievances to justify more attacks. Indeed, there are plenty of grievances to choose from.

Northern Nigeria as a whole has very deep development problems, perhaps deeper than the rest of the country. It has some of the worst maternal and infant mortality rates in the world. The level of poverty and deprivation is higher than the rest of the country, while active participation in politics, beyond fealty to a thin band of political and religious god-fathers who hold power, is low. The only way to remove the threat of the group in the long term is widespread reform of northern Nigeria that improves the livelihoods of northern Nigerians, and gives them a bigger stake in their politics.

The group’s general aim is to create a state-like body run on a strict interpretation of sharia that would eventually take over the whole of northern Nigeria. To that end the group’s future direction is likely to lead toward increased involvement in the Jos crisis, where it will attack Christian indigenes of the north. It will continue to attack softer targets in the north-east rather than turn on international targets inside or outside Nigeria. Funded by robberies on poorly protected banks and cash-in-transit convoys, and armed by weapons from Chad or by guns robbed or even purchased from the very security services charged with attacking it, Boko Haram’s activities could continue for many years.

If the group does pursue a more active role in the Jos crisis and increase attacks on indigenous Christian minorities and Igbo traders in the north, the wider implications for Nigeria are dire. If the conflict there were to erupt in a way that did not—as before—die down after a number of days, it could present a real threat to Nigeria’s unity.

It is difficult to see how the United States and Europe might positively help Nigeria in dealing with this problem. The author is not an expert on military aid, or on international police training programs and techniques. The United States and Europe might have a role to play in training the Nigerian military and police to be a more effective institution. However, such training in the past seems to have had little effect beyond giving a seal of approval to some officers, who may or may not live up to their training. It is likely that such training would not be sufficient to overpower the multiplicity of negative influences on these institutions. Following the March 2012 coup in Mali, led by an officer who had recently attended military training in the United States, sensitivities about such help might also be heightened.

It is important to state that Boko Haram offers little direct threat to U.S. interests in Nigeria at present, and that if the United States visibly aided the government of Nigeria, it and its citizens could become a target. Even so, U.S. citizens in Nigeria are not very numerous, and their interests are usually in the far south, where Boko Haram has not yet spread. The greatest threat posed by Boko Haram is to the stability and unity of Nigeria itself.

If Boko Haram continues to exist, then the agreement between the regional elites that keeps the country together could come under increasing strain. At the moment disagreements among elites are usually settled at secret meetings and resolved by horse trading over the country’s political resources. If the situation worsens and the elites’ agreement is fatally compromised, there is a chance that Nigeria could split. If the United States is interested in a unified Nigeria, then this would be a catastrophe.

However, trying to influence the situation at a government-to-government level contains its own inherent dangers. The legitimacy of Jonathan’s presidency is still not recognized by many in the north, and it has become apparent that he may run for another term in office. This deal between the elites of Nigeria is considerably more likely to be negatively influenced

by ill-thought-out involvement by the United States, especially if that involvement consists of injections of large amounts of money into Jonathan's government, than by the actions of Boko Haram.

More positively, the United States would be well advised to pursue policies that lead to the identification of the corrupt proceeds of economic crime that have been invested or hidden by politically exposed Nigerians within the United States. The jailing of former Delta state governor James Ibori by a London court proves that such a policy can have an impact. Reducing the ability of corrupt leaders to hide their cash outside the country will hopefully have a positive effect in Nigeria, because if nothing else such money will be more likely to end up back in Nigeria's economy.

The U.S. government should also pursue policies that help Nigeria diversify its economy and reduce its reliance on oil. Specifically, it should enact programs that aim to strengthen the Nigerian agricultural sector, the most likely to provide livelihoods, employment, and future prospects for northern youths.

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