



**Risk Mitigation Consulting Inc.**

*Intelligence and Analysis Division*

## WHITE PAPER SERIES

# Boko Haram: An Examination of Terrorist Resiliency and Adaptability

### **INTENT**

This white paper is designed to provide analysis of relevant, publicly available information on threat and hazard events/trends and their potential impacts to the interests of the United States, both at home and abroad. This product is not intended to be an all-encompassing assessment of the subject.



## **Boko Haram: An Examination of Terrorist Resiliency and Adaptability**

### **Introduction**

The terrorist organization Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, more commonly known as Boko Haram, may be overlooked when considering modern terrorist threats. Some have claimed Boko Haram is defeated and no longer poses a threat to the region, pointing to the abandonment of earlier territory claimed by the group. However, Boko Haram has been an active, destructive terrorist group within Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon since 2009. Though they no longer hold territory, their tactics and goals have adapted over time and proven resilient in the face of counterterrorism efforts.

Boko Haram has undergone several evolutions in recent years. Initially focused on opposing Western education when it was founded in 2002, the founder created a religious complex with the goal of educating and creating an Islamic caliphate. Later, in 2009, the group began military operations. It was officially designated a terrorist group by the United States in 2013. A year later, Boko Haram declared a caliphate in areas it controlled. However, by March 2015, Boko Haram had lost all the towns under its control. At this point, local government began claiming the group was "defeated." However, Boko Haram continued to carry out attacks, and it declared allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015, rebranding itself as the Islamic State's West Africa Province. U.S. intelligence officials have estimated that there are currently between four and six thousand hard-core militants, while other analysts say the group's membership could be three times that.<sup>1,2</sup>

### **Who 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 2002. The overarching aim of the group is to establish a fundamentalist Islamic state with sharia criminal courts. While Boko Haram has been unable to establish this state, they have successfully carried out a variety of terrorist attacks throughout Nigeria and its neighboring states.<sup>2</sup>

Boko Haram promotes a version of Islam which makes it "haram", or forbidden, for Muslims to take part in any political or social activity associated with Western society. This includes voting in elections, wearing shirts and pants, or receiving a secular education. Boko Haram regards the Nigerian state as being run by non-believers (regardless of whether the president is Muslim or not), and the group has extended its military campaign by targeting neighboring states. Yusuf criticized northern Muslims for participating in what he saw as an illegitimate, non-Islamic state.<sup>1,2</sup>

The group's official name, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, means "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad". Residents of Maiduguri, where the group had its headquarters, dubbed it Boko Haram. Loosely translated from the region's language, this means "Western education is forbidden".<sup>1</sup>



## **Motivation**

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, analysts believe that Boko Haram emerged as a consequence of deep religious and ethnic cleavages that have long troubled Nigeria. During their nearly half century of rule, the British merged various territories and peoples that had little in common other than geographic proximity. Nigeria comprises nearly 350 ethnic groups. At the same time, the country is roughly split between the Muslim-dominated north and Christian-dominated south. Some analysts have observed that Nigeria's record of political corruption and inequality has also contributed to the group's rise. Despite being Africa's biggest economy and home to a wealth of natural resources, Nigeria has one of the continent's poorest populations. Against this background, Yusuf formed Boko Haram. He set up a religious complex, which included a mosque and an Islamic school. However, Boko Haram's political goal was to create an Islamic state, and the school became a recruiting ground for jihadis.<sup>1, 2</sup>

## **Split**

In 2009, government forces killed more than eight hundred people, including many suspected Boko Haram members. During this time, Yusuf, the group's founder, was murdered while in police custody. Boko Haram splintered into at least two factions following Yusuf's death. Abubakar Shekau heads one faction, which appears to remain focused on fighting the Nigerian government in the northeast. Abu Musab al-Barnawi, Yusuf's son, has led a second faction, which has the same ultimate goals, but a less strict view of apostasy. Despite the internal divide, the group overall remains active.<sup>2</sup>

## **Technical Defeat**

In December 2015, the newly-elected Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, had declared the "technical defeat" of Boko Haram. In December 2016, he repeated the same words during a national broadcast celebrating the capture of "Camp Zairo," the group's operational headquarters in Sambisa Forest in North-East Nigeria. Since then, the concept of "technical defeat" has been part of the official government discourse in their claim to victory over Boko Haram.<sup>3</sup>

At that time, the Nigerian military had succeeded in pushing Boko Haram fighters out of urban areas and large swathes of territory spanning about 14 local government areas, eliminating the fundamentalist Islamic state Boko Haram had hoped to create. The terrorist group was also prevented from launching the large-scale attacks it used to; at present, it is largely confined to the fringes of Sambisa Forest and the Lake Chad area. However, stopping Boko Haram from claiming territory and forcing a change in types of attacks does not mean the group is defeated. As evidenced by their continued attacks, Boko Haram was able to adapt, changing their tactics and goals.<sup>3</sup>

## **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, the group has increased attacks on soft targets (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. The group's most well know attack occurred in April 2014, when Boko Haram



drew international condemnation by abducting more than 200 schoolgirls from Chibok town in Borno state.<sup>1,2</sup>

During 2014, Boko Haram began attempting to hold territory, aiming to create a caliphate. However, all land held by the group was taken back by Nigerian military forces by the end of 2015. Following the loss of their previously held territory and an increase in attacks by government forces, Boko Haram appears to have changed its strategy to become more mobile, adopting hit-and-run tactics instead of engaging in face-to-face confrontations with the heavily armed Nigerian troops. By hiding among locals within communities or in the forest, the group has become more elusive, relying on the element of surprise to attack both soft and military targets.<sup>3</sup>

Boko Haram still launches attacks on soft targets in cities, mostly through suicide missions, raids, and abductions. They have attacked Internally Displaced Persons' camps in cities and civilians in public spaces, in addition to ambushing soldiers and overrunning multiple barracks. A majority of the recent attacks have targeted civilian populations in Borno State, and the fact that the terrorists can still invade cities and launch attacks shows that they are yet to be defeated. Despite being pushed into remote areas, Boko Haram will likely continue to disrupt the region's development for some time.<sup>2,3</sup>

### **Response**

In May 2013, the Nigerian government declared a state of emergency in the three northern states where Boko Haram was strongest - Borno, Yobe and Adamawa. In 2013, the United States officially identified Boko Haram as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. Nigeria has sought military support from its neighbors, who increasingly suffered attacks during Boko Haram's surge of activity. Since 2015, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger have deployed thousands of troops as part of a multinational force authorized by the African Union. Following the 2014 Chibok schoolgirl abductions, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States pledged additional assistance, including equipment and intelligence support. U.S. assistance totaled more than \$400 million by early 2016. Most recently, the United States has continued to sell arms and aircraft to Nigeria in support of its counterterrorism efforts.<sup>1,2</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Boko Haram remains a threat to Africa's most populous country, fueling instability across the Lake Chad Basin. The terrorist organization 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. Amnesty International has estimated that some 2,000 children remain in the group's captivity. Boko Haram has been linked to the deaths of more than 37,000 people since 2011, according to Council on Foreign Relations' Nigeria Security Tracker, which monitors political violence in the country. About half of those killed were suspected Boko Haram militants, while roughly 45% were civilians and 5% were security forces.<sup>1,2</sup>

Boko Haram has outlived other militant groups in northern Nigeria and has built a presence in neighboring states where it has carried out attacks and has recruited fighters. The group has a force of thousands of men (CIA officials have estimated around 9,000) and cells that specialize in



bombings. Through raids on military bases and banks, the group has gained control of vast amounts of weapons and money.<sup>1</sup>

Like many other terrorist groups, conventional definitions of ‘defeat’ cannot accurately depict conditions on the ground. Boko Haram does not need to achieve its ultimate goal of establishing its own state to be successful. If the group continues to locally attack and disrupt the “illegitimate” Nigerian government, they will succeed in spreading terror, gaining renown, and attracting recruits. Though the territory once held by the group has since been reclaimed, Boko Haram has successfully adapted, living in the fringes of forests and carrying out attacks on soft targets. Boko Haram has shown that it does not need to hold territory to present a credible threat to the region. Despite international efforts to fight and eliminate the group, Boko Haram has amassed weapons, money, and thousands of fighters. They will continue to recruit and adapt, fighting, by any means necessary, what they see as an illegitimate Nigerian state.

## Source List

1. “Who are Nigeria's Boko Haram Islamist group?” *BBC News*. 24 November 2016.
2. Nigeria’s Battle With Boko Haram. *Council on Foreign Relations*. 8 August 2018.
3. Boko Haram and the Concept of Technical Defeat. Azeez Olaniyan. 18 September 2018.