

Background: Boko Haram in Nigeria

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November 2017

Boko Haram is a Salafi-jihadi militant organization waging an insurgency against the state in northeastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin region. Several competing factions, including ISIS Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya, comprise the group. Boko Haram seeks to establish *shari'a*-based governance in areas under its control.

Founding and a Turn to Violence, 2002–09

Mohammed Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, grew up in an environment steeped in fundamentalist Islamic teachings like many in Nigeria's majority-Muslim northeast. Yusuf was raised in the Nigerian city of Maiduguri, where he attended a conservative mosque and studied Islamic theologians, such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Usman Ibn Fodio.¹ Yusuf also received Quranic education in neighboring Chad and Niger, and he quickly became involved in conservative Islamic organizations upon his return to Borno State.² Later in life, Yusuf sought refuge from Nigerian authorities in Saudi Arabia, the source of historical Islamic ideologies that shaped Yusuf's rejection of Western modernity.³

Yusuf founded *Jama'at Ahl al Sunna lil Da'wal Jihad* (the group of the people of Sunna for preaching and jihad) in 2002. The group is commonly known as Boko Haram, which roughly translates from Hausa as "Western education is forbidden." The group seeks to establish an Islamic polity under *shari'a*-based governance. Yusuf derided Western influence in Nigeria as incompatible with Islam. He gained followers and credibility by speaking out against Western intervention in the Middle East, rampant corruption in

the Nigerian government, and surging social inequality. Yusuf argued that corrupting Western values were the source of the myriad disparities between Lagos and the neglected Muslim north.⁴

The Borno State administration in northeastern Nigeria supported Boko Haram initially. Ali Modu Sheriff was elected governor in 2003 after winning the support of Yusuf and his followers by promising stricter enforcement of *shari'a*.⁵ Sheriff appointed Boko Haram members to the influential Ministry of Religious Affairs. Other Muslim leaders urged the Nigerian government to stop the spread of Yusuf's ideology, but the government ignored their pleas.⁶

Despite his earlier alliance with Borno politicians, Yusuf soon abandoned cooperation with the state. Tensions increased after Sheriff passed over Yusuf's acolytes for positions in the lucrative Ministry of Finance. A joint task force assigned to curb crime in Borno State created new conflicts between Yusuf's men and security forces.⁷ From 2003 until 2004, Boko Haram sympathizers launched several deadly attacks against police stations in the northern Yobe and Borno States. Yusuf continued to advocate radical action against the Nigerian state and the corrupt ruling elite, even as Nigerian authorities ratcheted up the pressure on his followers. However, the Nigerian government did not prioritize the rising tensions in the northeast and instead addressed an insurgency in the southern Niger delta region that threatened to disrupt Nigeria's largest export: oil.⁸

The group shifted strategies at the end of 2004, refocusing on recruiting and gathering resources in the face of a long struggle against the Nigerian authorities. Yusuf took this opportunity to perform *hajj* (Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca) and

returned to Nigeria with renewed zeal. He began to combine his fundamentalist preaching with social welfare programs and amassed even more followers by 2007. Yusuf's ability to mobilize the population in northern Nigeria made him an attractive tool for the political elite, despite Boko Haram's rejection of state authority. Governor Sheriff appointed Yusuf and another senior Boko Haram member as commissioners of Islamic affairs in 2007, although both resigned over *shari'a* disputes shortly afterward.⁹

Boko Haram transformed from an often violent religious movement into an insurgency in July 2009. On June 11, 2009, Borno State's joint task force confronted Boko Haram members riding motorcycles without helmets and killed 17 militants in the ensuing clash.¹⁰ Yusuf was quick to threaten a reprisal, while security forces redoubled efforts against the group. More than 60 Boko Haram members attacked a police station in Bauchi State on July 26. The following three days of violence between Boko Haram and security forces left more than 800 people dead.¹¹ Nigerian police officers arrested Yusuf and summarily executed him with several other Boko Haram members on July 30.¹²

Dormancy and Resurgence, 2009–12

The 2009 government crackdown successfully quelled the violence. Yusuf's second-in-command, Abubakar Shekau, announced his control of the group in July 2010 after recovering from injuries sustained while escaping arrest in 2009.¹³ Yusuf's third-in-command, a Cameroonian named Mamman Nur, likely attempted to lead the group in the interim, but Shekau quickly solidified his position as emir by marrying one of Yusuf's wives and adopting his children.¹⁴

Shekau's rise changed the nature of the Boko Haram insurgency and alienated some who followed the ideology Yusuf promoted. Shekau was described as coarse and fanatic, in stark contrast to Yusuf's charisma.¹⁵ He was an avid student of Yusuf in the late 1990s and took Yusuf's aversion to Western influence to a violent extreme. Shekau also justified the use of child and female operatives for suicide operations in pursuit of these beliefs.

Boko Haram launched offensive operations against the Nigerian state in September 2010, when 50 militants attacked a prison in Bauchi State, freeing more than 700 prisoners, including 150 followers of Yusuf.¹⁶ Boko Haram began a campaign of indiscriminate violence across northeastern Nigeria. Shekau deployed suicide bombers and gunmen to attack civilian centers, churches, mosques, and police stations in Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, Kano, Kaduna, and Bauchi States. Boko Haram militants targeted civilians, security forces, Christians, and Muslims, in accordance with Shekau's guidance to kill anyone who did not adhere to his brand of Islam.¹⁷

The al Qaeda network provided limited support to Boko Haram, although Shekau's ideological position likely prevented his group's full acceptance by al Qaeda. Shekau developed a relationship with al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as early as August 2009, when he sent three senior commanders to Mali and Algeria for bomb-making training.¹⁸ Shekau also sought guidance from Ayman al Zawahiri to learn more about how al Qaeda is organized, although he never publicly pledged allegiance.¹⁹

The al Qaeda network provided Boko Haram with the training for its first attack against a Western target. Boko Haram militants detonated a car bomb inside a United Nations building in Abuja, Nigeria's capital, in August 2011.²⁰ The attack was masterminded by Mamman Nur, Yusuf's third deputy, who trained with al Shabaab and AQIM before returning to Nigeria in 2011.²¹ Nur was likely directed to attack Western interests by his AQIM associates, rather than by Shekau. His al Qaeda contacts also shaped the strategic direction of the splinter group he would soon form.

Ansaru Schism and Escalating Violence, 2012–14

Shekau's brutal tactics caused a schism in the leadership. Several Boko Haram leaders broke with Shekau in 2012 to form *Jama'at Ansar al Muslimin fi Bilad al Sudan* (Group of Supporters for Muslims in the Black Lands), commonly known as Ansaru. The faction aligned closely with the al Qaeda network. Ansaru's leadership included Nur, who retained contact with AQIM

after training with its members, and Khalid al Barnawi, one of the senior commanders sent to train with AQIM in Mali and Algeria.²²

Ansaru's leaders argued for a strategy more closely aligned with al Qaeda's strategy. Ansaru leadership advocated targeting security forces and prioritizing international targets. The group particularly focused on kidnapping Westerners in the Lake Chad Basin, either for ransom or prisoner swaps.²³ It also participated in joint operations with the AQIM-affiliated al Mulathamun Brigade,²⁴ led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar in Algeria and Niger. In contrast to Boko Haram, most of Ansaru's operations were small-scale with meticulous planning and execution. Ansaru effectively ceased operations by late 2013 but continued to publish propaganda.²⁵ Several of Ansaru's top leaders likely reintegrated into Shekau's Boko Haram, including Khalid al Barnawi. When al Barnawi was arrested in Nigeria in April 2016, the military identified him as a member of Boko Haram's Shura Council.²⁶

Shekau's Boko Haram increased its campaign of indiscriminate violence across northern Nigeria during this time. Militants bombed several government buildings in Kano before driving through the city and shooting civilians in a January 2012 attack that killed at least 185 people. A roadside massacre of civilians in September 2013 killed at least 160 people in Borno State. Boko Haram killed more than 4,000 civilians and security personnel in Nigeria in attacks attributed to it from 2012 to 2014.²⁷

Notoriety and Territorial Maximum, 2014–15

Boko Haram leveraged existing recruiting efforts and newfound international notoriety to add to its ranks, augment its capabilities, and expand territorially in 2014.

Yusuf's folk-hero status, not Shekau's leadership, among the impoverished population of northern Nigeria lent Boko Haram support and recruits even though Shekau had been emir of the group for nearly five years. Yusuf's exhortations and Shekau's attacks against the *yan boko* (educated elite) resonated strongly with the locals who felt forgotten by Abuja and Lagos.²⁸ Shekau's

role as a longtime deputy to Yusuf and his continued presence in Borno State, the birthplace of Boko Haram, also gave him clout with grassroots supporters.²⁹

Endemic issues in northern Nigeria also contributed to Boko Haram's growth. Tough living conditions brought on by mass unemployment and poverty factored into youth radicalization.³⁰ Boko Haram recruited successfully among children with difficult upbringings, even when Boko Haram caused their troubles.³¹ Boko Haram's ideology could spread in part because of religious ignorance and illiteracy in the population. Abuses by Nigerian security forces against the civilian population during counter-Boko Haram operations further legitimized the grievances that Boko Haram championed.³² For example, the Nigerian Army executed at least 640 detainees at a Maiduguri detention center in March 2014.³³

Boko Haram's kidnapping of 276 female students from a secondary school in Chibok, Nigeria, catapulted the group onto the world stage. The event sparked international outrage. US First Lady Michelle Obama promoted the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag, and the Chibok kidnapping became the most-tweeted topic on Twitter and triggered protests worldwide. Most importantly, it demonstrated that Boko Haram could execute high-visibility attacks on the same order of magnitude as well-known and established Salafi-jihadi groups.

Boko Haram rapidly seized control of territory in the summer of 2014, putting its newfound fame and fresh recruits to work. The Nigerian military was not prepared. Nigerian soldiers, facing superior numbers and firepower, often deserted their posts during Boko Haram offensives. Allegations of officers collaborating with militants likewise broke morale among frontline troops.³⁴ Boko Haram militants swarmed across Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States in Nigeria; the Far North Region of Cameroon; the Diffa region of Niger; and Lake Province in Chad. By the beginning of 2015, Boko Haram controlled a swath of land roughly the size of Belgium.³⁵

Al Qaeda refused to partner with Shekau's Boko Haram despite the group's expanded territory and global notoriety. Al Qaeda-linked magazine *al Risala* prominently featured an article by

an Ansaru leader that condemned Shekau's tactics.³⁶ Increasingly public criticism and the refusal to openly partner with Boko Haram indicated that al Qaeda leadership likely wished to distance the al Qaeda brand name from Shekau because of his use of women and children as suicide bombers.³⁷ AQIM spiritual leader Abu Mundhir al Shinqiti even issued a fatwa against indiscriminately killing schoolchildren, likely aimed at Shekau.³⁸

MNJTF Offensive and Pledge to ISIS, 2015–16

The Chibok kidnapping and Boko Haram's seemingly effortless capture of Nigeria's northeast humiliated President Goodluck Jonathan in the lead up to the 2015 Nigerian presidential elections. He lost the backing of his party's powerbrokers, and his opponent Muhammadu Buhari took every opportunity to excoriate him for allowing the north to fall. Jonathan announced a renewed offensive against Boko Haram after a summit with other West African leaders.³⁹

Jonathan turned to the other states in the Lake Chad Basin to create a regional force to repel Boko Haram's advances. The resulting Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) includes Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. An African Union mandate afforded the MNJTF latitude to conduct operations throughout Boko Haram's area of operations, although each country's troops were confined within their own borders until March 2015.⁴⁰ The US and EU supported the MNJTF. The US deployed troops to Cameroon and Niger to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, while the French Air Force began providing close air support to troops in Niger and Chad.⁴¹ The regional force made rapid progress, recapturing 11 of the 14 Boko Haram-controlled districts in northeast Nigeria by mid-March 2015.⁴²

Shekau pledged *bayat* (allegiance) to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi on March 7, 2015.⁴³ Boko Haram was losing territory rapidly at the time, and Shekau sought to encourage ISIS to accept his pledge by conducting a multipronged suicide attack on Maiduguri, killing at least 58 civilians and wounding more than 150.⁴⁴ ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammed al Adnani welcomed

Shekau's pledge of allegiance one week later and dubbed Boko Haram ISIS Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya (Province of West Africa).⁴⁵

Another Schism, 2016–Present

Shekau's violent and indiscriminate tactics caused another rift in the organization even more serious than the Ansaru dispute. Shekau's cavalier use of *takfir* (declaring another Muslim an apostate and sentencing him or her to death) in targeting civilian populations proved to be too extreme even for ISIS.⁴⁶ ISIS leadership most likely relayed guidance to Shekau to end this practice, among others, because it broke from practices condoned under ISIS's ideology.⁴⁷ Boko Haram fractured. ISIS recognized Abu Mus'ab al Barnawi, the 22-year-old son of Boko Haram founder Mohammad Yusuf, as the new leader of ISIS Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya in August 2016.⁴⁸ Barnawi announced that the group would absolutely prohibit targeting Muslim civilians in a sharp break with the practices of Shekau's faction. Barnawi refocused the fight on security forces, MNJTF troops, and Christians.⁴⁹ ISIS propaganda later framed ISIS Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya's insurgency as a popular struggle between Nigeria's Muslim north and Christians backed by the MNJTF and the West.⁵⁰

Shekau and his deputies publicly rejected ISIS's decision, claiming that Barnawi did not follow authentic Islam and that his decisions were not sound according to Islamic teachings.⁵¹ Internecine clashes between the rival factions broke out in the Monguno and Marte local governments in Borno State. The two factions disengaged after a few weeks. Shekau's faction reverted to its original name (*Jama'at Ahl al Sunna lil Da'wa wal Jihad*).

Both Boko Haram factions retreated to separate spheres of influence in the Lake Chad region. The principal cell of Shekau's faction operates out of the Sambisa Forest reserve in northeastern Nigeria, where it has mounted regular attacks on Maiduguri and surrounding locales throughout 2017.⁵² Another Shekau-faction cell is likely based in the Waza National Park in northern Cameroon, where locals have reported militant activity and surrounding villages have been regularly attacked by female suicide bombers.⁵³ ISIS Wilayat Gharb

Ifriqiyya is principally based in the Lake Chad Basin region, from which it has published propaganda in late 2016 and 2017.⁵⁴ The faction also likely has a smaller cell in the Agijin Forest reserve on the border of Borno and Yobe States, which launched attacks on the Nigerian military near Kamuya in early 2017.⁵⁵ A faction led by Mamman Nur, loosely allied with Barnawi, likely operates in the Kala-Balge region of Nigeria near the Cameroon border, according to captured militants.⁵⁶

Shekau's faction retains the capability for frequent, high-casualty attacks. During Ramadan in 2017, the group launched at least 39 attacks across the region, with almost daily suicide bombings in northern Cameroon and a complex incursion into Maiduguri city with vehicles and suicide bombers.⁵⁷ ISIS Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya has conducted sporadic attacks against MNJTF forces around Lake Chad and northern Nigeria.⁵⁸ Both groups publish propaganda that attempts to show implementation of *shari'a* among locals, although neither group controls any significant populated locations.⁵⁹

The groups showed brief signs of deconfliction before reverting to overt opposition. In June and July 2017, suspected Boko Haram suicide bombers and militants attacked two towns in the Diffa region. Although the Diffa region is adjacent to ISIS Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya's territory, the attacks used distinctive Shekau-faction tactics, including female suicide bombers and summary execution

of civilians, indicating that the Shekau faction may enjoy freedom of operation in its rival faction's territory.⁶⁰ ISIS Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya further affirmed its continued opposition to Shekau in August, releasing a propaganda video titled "Exposing Shekau's Intentions," in which the group rebukes Shekau for targeting Muslim civilians.⁶¹ A day earlier, likely Shekau faction militants executed several dozen civilians near ISIS Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya's stronghold on Lake Chad.⁶²

While both factions retain capabilities for sustained violence, ISIS Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya's strategy of avoiding popular alienation by only targeting security forces will likely pay dividends in the long term.⁶³ Barnawi's faction also enjoys some degree of support and central direction from Islamic State central leadership, while Shekau's faction persists without substantial outside backing. While Shekau appears content with ravaging the unstable Lake Chad region, the Islamic State has clearly defined goals of attacking Western—particularly American—interests. Shekau's dogged proclamations that his faction will *baqiyya* (remain) ensures that some iteration of Boko Haram will exist in Nigeria in the future, but the burgeoning Barnawi faction—with visions of attacking American targets and likely more support—poses a clear and growing threat to American lives in West Africa.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Frederick W. Kagan, Katherine Zimmerman, and Emily Estelle at the Critical Threats Project for their tireless assistance in putting this paper together, as well as Ethan Beaudoin for his valuable assistance. I would also like to thank Michael Montemalo, Michael Matlaga, and Megan Schleicher for their part in proofreading and refining my assessments in the final product.

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