

**Statement before the
House Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence**

***“BOKO HARAM-
EMERGING THREAT TO THE U.S.
HOMELAND”***

A Statement by

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Statement for the Record
House Committee on Homeland Security
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Chairman Meehan, Ranking Member Speier, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I’d like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Boko Haram.¹ I will limit my remarks to a few brief points on Boko Haram’s evolution and the context in which it operates and offer some thoughts on implications for U.S. engagement.

Established in 2002, Boko Haram’s initial incarnation was as a fairly narrow, insulated sect operating in the remote northeastern corner of Nigeria in the Borno state capital of Maiduguri. Its founding leader Muhammed Yussuf called for a rejection of the corrupting influence of Western culture and state authority and of traditional religious authorities who were seen as degenerate collaborators in a fundamentally immoral government system. The group drew its adherents largely from disaffected university students and unemployed youth with few prospects of economic opportunity or social advancement. Boko Haram is not the first group to violently oppose secular and religious authority structures in northern Nigeria, but its expanding array of targets and gradual adoption of modern terror tactics is a new and deeply alarming turn, setting a dangerous precedent for potential successor groups that may arise from among Nigeria’s politically alienated, economically marginalized, and largely youthful northern populations.

The suicide attacks on UN headquarters in Abuja on August 26, 2011, propelled the group to international notoriety. But they also revealed a Nigerian federal administration wholly unprepared to deal with the escalating threat in a coherent, strategic, and calibrated way. Coming on the heels of the April 2011 post-election crisis that left some 800 northerners dead, the attacks further underscored the failure of successive Nigerian administrations to bridge the growing economic and political rift between the country’s north and south. Boko Haram is simply one manifestation of the profound failure of successive Nigerian governments to curb corruption, deliver public services, generate economic opportunity, establish accountable security institutions, and engage communities in both the north and south in a more fully national polity.

The Nigerian government’s response to Boko Haram will need to be integrated into a comprehensive political, economic, and security strategy that offers some promise of real improvement to northern populations and communities and limits the appeal of Boko

¹ Boko Haram, meaning “Western education is a sin,” is the colloquial name given to the group which formally calls itself *Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal Jihad* (“People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad,” in Arabic). At its inception, the group was also locally known as the Nigerian Taliban.

Haram and its potential successors. The United States would do well to avoid any association with ham-handed, short-sighted security responses emanating from Abuja and instead press the government to plan and pursue a comprehensive and strategic approach with urgency and commitment.

The core aims of Boko Haram appear at present to remain limited to the Nigerian domestic scene, even though Western targets within Nigeria will appeal because of their visibility and political impact. There is the possibility of greater collusion with al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, with reports of members training with AQIM in Mauritania and Mali and possible sharing of information on tactics and technologies. But there is little sign at present, apart from an occasional rhetorical flourish, of any global or even regional ambitions on the part of Boko Haram leadership.

Boko Haram poses little immediate threat to the U.S. homeland, although U.S. citizens and assets in Nigeria may well be vulnerable as the group seeks high-profile, high-impact targets. The more imminent threat is a fundamentally destabilizing crisis within Nigeria, which as an important energy supplier, security partner, and regional and continental powerhouse, is one of the United States' most strategically important allies in Africa.

Some points to keep in mind:

Boko Haram is fractured and evolving

Boko Haram's fluidity and seemingly divided leadership will pose an intelligence challenge but may also offer opportunities to "peel away" individuals or factions and isolate more purely criminal or recalcitrant elements.

The killing of founder Mohammed Yussuf while in police custody in July 2009 marked something of a turning point for the movement. Along with an escalation of tactics and an expanding range of targets, the vacuum left by Yussuf has led to an apparent fracturing of its leadership and coherence. There remains a great deal that is unknown about Boko Haram's inner workings; nonetheless, observers point to the emergence of three main groups: the first is a more religiously ideological hard core element, led by Abubakar Shakau, a close associate of Yussuf. Despite this faction's ideological bent, some observers suggest that Shakau may be open to a negotiated settlement with federal authorities.

A second faction is thought to derive support from state and national political figures whose ambition is to undermine local authorities, or reveal President Goodluck Jonathan as weak and ineffective, possibly precipitating a recall by ruling party leadership or at the very least assuring the return of the presidency to the north in the country's next national election.

Finally, observers point to a more opportunistic grouping, which many allege simply uses the Boko Haram brand and associated insecurity as cover for criminal activity and self-enrichment. This group may draw inspiration from the money-making tactics and kidnap-for-ransom operations by militants in the Niger Delta or al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

affiliates in the Sahel. These divisions within Boko Haram are not always clear-cut, and the group's "leadership" often issue conflicting public messages.

A possibility for dialogue and negotiation remains on the table

There is some suggestion, as noted above, that Abubakar Shakau remains open to the possibility of dialogue and negotiation. Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan has indicated that he is open to dialogue, although his enthusiasm may be waning. A presidentially appointed panel the concluded in September 2011 that "the Federal Government should fundamentally consider the option of dialogue and negotiation which should be contingent upon the renunciation of all forms of violence and surrender of arms to be followed by rehabilitation." Borno State governor Kashim Shettima has reiterated the call for "sincere dialogue," and a group of Borno state elders have called on President Jonathan to initiate engagement. A national opinion poll by the Nigerian CLEEN Foundation indicates that 58 percent of Nigerians support dialogue (80 percent in the northeast region most affected).

The group's demands range from the improbable—including full implementation of Shari'a in northern Nigeria (with some adherents advocating Shari'a for all of Nigeria—to the more plausible—including full accountability for police and security forces involved in the extra-judicial killing of Yussuf and the associated violence that left 700 dead; public access to a former national security adviser's investigation and report on the 2009 crackdown; the release of imprisoned Boko Haram members; and the rebuilding of mosques and other buildings destroyed by security forces.

Any strategy to engage Boko Haram—whether negotiations, pay-offs, or amnesty offers—will have inherent risks. Negotiations with one element of Boko Haram may cause further splintering or hardening among other factions. Pay-offs set a dangerous precedent in creating incentives for other actors to take up arms, and broad amnesty offers may create a culture of impunity that leaves victims without recourse to justice. But while Boko Haram remains a relatively new grouping and its leadership and structure in flux, there may be opportunities to peel off factions and leaders more amenable to negotiation and isolate more intractable factions. Dialogue is worth pursuing, and compromise on objectively reasonable demands, such as police accountability and community reconstruction warrants testing.

Boko Haram is one manifestation of growing alienation in the North that must be addressed in a long-term response

Although its methods are at present rejected by most northerners, Boko Haram is a product of deepening economic decline and growing political alienation in the North. This decline has seen a loss of respect for state and local authorities who have failed to deliver even the most basic services to their constituents, and to some extent an erosion of traditional religious authorities who are often perceived to be in collusion with a corrupt political establishment.

The greatest axis of division and resentment is the growing economic disparity between the northern Nigeria and the wealthier South, and the perception that southern political elites have ignored the interests and priorities of northern populations. Many northerners felt it was “their” turn at the presidency in 2011, since the late President Yar’Adua failed to serve his full term. The violent response to President Jonathan’s victory reflected the perception of northerners that they are the losers in the zero-sum game of Nigerian politics.

The traditional mainstays of Nigeria’s northern economy—agriculture, textiles, manufacturing—have collapsed since independence as successive governments (of both northern and southern origin) focused exclusively on the lucrative oil sector. Unemployment in some northern states is estimated at 90 percent, and indicators in health, education, and sanitation are among the lowest in the country. Poverty alleviation and development efforts have largely bypassed the north, focusing instead on the volatile Niger Delta region, where militant groups have threatened international companies and the global oil supply.

Failure to address these fundamental vulnerabilities may ultimately lead Boko Haram and potential successors to make common cause with growing segments of Nigeria’s northern population. An accumulation and convergence of grievances with combined with an escalation of violent confrontation and terror tactics could prove a profoundly destabilizing to the Nigerian state. Reversing the North’s long-standing economic decline and bridging the North-South divide will constitute a long-term endeavor, but it is one that should begin immediately and with urgency.

Boko Haram does not enjoy broad community support

At present, Boko Haram enjoys little support in the communities in which it operates, and this is perhaps the greatest advantage and opportunity in crafting an effective national and international response. It is an advantage that the Nigerian government should do its utmost to preserve.

Unlike militant groups in the oil-producing Niger Delta, Boko Haram has not presented itself primarily as an interlocutor for poor and disenfranchised northern populations. Although its adherents are influenced by the same political and socioeconomic factors that have led to a widespread sense of alienation and resentment among northern populations, the group’s political/religious agenda and demands have had little resonance across the North. Thousands have fled the towns in which Boko Haram has launched its attacks, and local community members have been intimidated by assassinations of clerics who disagree with the group’s preachings or individuals suspected of collaborating with security forces.

The Nigerian government should seek to capitalize on this lack of popular support for Boko Haram and engage the communities that ultimately will need to be part of a comprehensive solution. Instead, however, the government’s heavy-handed and overwhelmingly security-focused response has led to further alienation and deepening

distrust. A major Joint Task Force deployment (of military and police personnel) to Borno in summer 2011 inflamed tensions, with widespread accusations of arbitrary arrests, extra-judicial killings, torture, and intimidation. Police corruption and abuse has become one of the defining grievances of Boko Haram and one that is very likely to resonate with communities in the north (and nationally). The federal structure of Nigeria's police means that officers are usually not from the areas to which they are deployed, have little empathy with, or understanding of, local communities, and generally have adversarial relations with local populations.

The Nigerian government's strategy is not yet clear

Ultimately, for better or worse, the onus of responding to Boko Haram rests with the Nigerian government. There is considerable concern that the government may lack the capacity and political will to mount an effective, comprehensive response. The most visible response to date has been an overweening security presence in the North that has antagonized and intimidated local populations. At present, there appear to be divisions within the federal government on how best to engage with Boko Haram; little coordination, communication, or intelligence sharing among the government's multiple security agencies; suggestions of a potential free-for-all with private security firms bidding for government contracts; and no clearly articulated national strategy or security framework to guide a comprehensive response. President Jonathan has promised that "with the renewed vigour [sic] by Nigeria's security agencies to curb the menace of Boko Haram, the existence of the group in the shores of Nigeria will soon be history." But this claim holds little promise for a nuanced, calibrated response that engages communities or addresses urgent long-term vulnerabilities.

What are the implications for U.S. policy?

What do these various factors mean for U.S. policy? First and foremost, the U.S. approach should be nuanced and low-key, being careful to avoid actions that escalate the crisis, alienate communities, and limit options for negotiation.

In the short term:

- Diplomatically, the United States must press and encourage the Nigerian government to formulate and articulate a national security strategy that commits the government to comprehensive, balanced approach and can help guide a more coordinate and effective national and international response.
- Because Boko Haram's leadership and structure appear to be fluid and fracturing, with some elements open to the possibility of dialogue, the United States should give careful consideration to the potential consequences of officially designating the group as a foreign terrorist organization. In the short term, the designation risks further radicalizing Boko Haram, lending coherence to a group that appears to be fractured, and narrowing the opportunity for dialogue and negotiation, which the majority of Nigerians, particularly in areas most affected by Boko Haram, appear to support.

- The United States should seek ways to engage more fully and meaningfully with communities in northern Nigeria, particularly in the northeastern states of Borno and Yobe. As a first step, the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations might consider working with the U.S. Embassy in Abuja, the Nigerian government, and nongovernmental organizations to better gauge northern priorities in development, economic growth, security, and conflict mitigation to identify areas of opportunity and help guide a longer-term U.S. (and possibly Nigerian) interagency response.
- The United States government should consider working with the Nigerian federal government and northern state governments, to devise quick-impact projects that give some sense of renewed government engagement on local needs and development priorities, whether in infrastructure, construction, sanitation, or health. The purpose would be to win some short-term good will from local communities and leaders, although they should not be viewed as substitutes for longer-term investments in sustainable development.
- In responding to Boko Haram, the United States should limit its security engagement to strengthening Nigerian intelligence capacities; advising on civilian protection measures, promoting community engagement; and encouraging professionalism, restraint, and accountability. More direct engagement risks association with intrusive and deeply unpopular security responses to Boko Haram and creates a perception that the United States is empowering the federal government to take coercive action against northerners.

In the longer-term:

- The United States should consider opening a U.S. consulate in the northern Nigeria to expand contact and engagement with state and local government leaders, civil society, business leaders, and ordinary citizens. Establishment of a consulate in Kano has been under consideration for some time; the 2011 post-election crisis in the North and the rise of the Boko Haram phenomenon warrant greater diplomatic engagement, not withdrawal.
- The United States should encourage the Nigerian government in a longer-term strategy of economic revitalization in the north, seeking opportunities for foreign direct investment, infrastructure enhancement, investment in agricultural productivity and processing, employment generation, and offering incentive programs to state and local governments that make good faith investments in development, social service delivery, and transparency. In a country the size of Nigeria, the administration might consider devising a Millennium Challenge Account model that could operate at a sub-national level to incentivize and reward good governance and unlock economic potential.
- The United States should continue to strengthen regional security cooperation and intelligence sharing within ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States) and the states of the Maghreb to improve capacities to monitor and interdict flows of arms and personnel and to track possible links among criminal or terrorist networks.