

LECTURE

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Boko Haram: An Overlooked Threat to U.S. Security

The Honorable Patrick Meehan

Abstract

Since 2009, the jihadist insurgency in Nigeria known as Boko Haram has been escalating its attacks across the country, targeting security forces, politicians, and civilians. Assuming that Boko Haram will refrain from targeting U.S. interests in Nigeria (a country of strategic significance) or in the U.S. homeland is a dangerous gamble—as was the case with other terror groups that were badly underestimated as posing only limited threats. Representative Patrick Meehan, who chairs the House Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, explains the need for increased U.S.–Nigerian security cooperation and for U.S. vigilance. Boko Haram’s sheer brutality, its expanding list of targets, and its relationships with al-Qaeda affiliates pose an enormous counterterrorism and intelligence challenge for the American government.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/h1210>

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It is great to be here at The Heritage Foundation, which is an asset to all Members of Congress and their staffs.

I want to begin by thanking Morgan Roach and The Heritage Foundation for inviting me to speak on this very timely topic. I commend Heritage for organizing this discussion to examine the security challenges posed by the terrorist group Boko Haram.

I also look forward to hearing again from my fellow panelists, Dr. Peter Pham and Dr. Ricardo Larémont. Both of these experts offered insightful testimony at my November 2011 hearing on Boko Haram, and their work in this area is ahead of the curve and unparalleled. I thank them for their contributions.¹

A Threat-Focused Agenda

The rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria is an issue I have been monitoring closely. As I mentioned, the Homeland Security Committee’s Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, which I chair, held a hearing on Boko Haram in November of last year.

This hearing featured the release of our bipartisan subcommittee report that examined the threat to the U.S. homeland posed by Boko Haram. As Chairman, I have tried

KEY POINTS

- There has been a pattern in recent years of allegedly regional terrorist organizations—such as AQAP and TTP—unexpectedly targeting the U.S. homeland.
- Such attempted attacks, however, should have been expected. The question now is whether the U.S. Intelligence Community will similarly underestimate Nigeria’s Boko Haram.
- Since 2009, the jihadist and violent Boko Haram has been escalating its attacks across Nigeria—a country of strategic significance to the U.S.—targeting security forces, politicians, and civilians.
- Boko Haram’s brutality, its expanding list of targets, and its relationships with al-Qaeda affiliates is an enormous counterterrorism and intelligence challenge for the U.S.
- The U.S. should increase its security operation with Nigeria, remain vigilant, and officially designate Boko Haram a foreign terrorist organization. The United States must have moral clarity about the enemies it faces.

very hard to focus on current homeland threats and, perhaps more important, *emerging* threats to the homeland.

To that end, I have attempted to employ a sober imagination in analyzing the myriad threats to our homeland. In my first year as Chairman, we examined al-Qaeda's affiliate networks in places like Yemen and their efforts to attack the United States. We also looked at how the shifting landscape of the Arab Spring was affecting the war on terror and how al-Qaeda could use it to its advantage. We shed light on Hezbollah's activities in Latin America, including its fundraising operations and its potential to mobilize an attack on American soil. The subcommittee also held the first congressional hearing examining Iran's capabilities to attack the homeland following revelation of a plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to the United States in Washington, D.C.

Underestimating the Threat

We have done all this in an effort to stay ahead of the curve because the threat has changed. In recent years, we have repeatedly seen the similar patterns emerge—where so-called regionally focused terrorist organizations “suddenly” target the U.S. homeland.

Throughout 2009, the assessment by the U.S. Intelligence Community was that the al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) would target only Saudi Arabia and Yemen and lacked the intent and capability to conduct a strike against the U.S. homeland. This assumption was proved wrong on Christmas Day 2009, when Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to

blow up a U.S. airliner over Detroit while hundreds of millions of Americans were gathered together with their family enjoying Christmas dinner.

Similarly, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was supposedly interested only in the local insurgency against the government of Pakistan until it recruited, trained, and deployed U.S. national Faisal Shahzad to drive a car bomb into Times Square. Had Shahzad been successful it would have killed hundreds of innocent Americans and foreign tourists.

Perhaps most important, the U.S. Intelligence Community has long assessed that Iran and its terrorist proxies would not conduct attacks on the U.S. homeland. This assessment was proven wrong late last year when it was revealed that Iran had planned an attack in Washington, D.C.

Some may argue that I am being overly critical of the Intelligence Community, but I disagree. As someone who was sworn in as the United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania one week after 9/11, and prosecuted terrorists—including assisting my good friend and then-fellow U.S. Attorney Chris Christie in convicting the Fort Dix Six—I fully understand from an *operational* perspective how the Intelligence Community has evolved, and appreciate the tremendous work it does to keep us all safe. Just as one example, I encourage everyone to study closely the intelligence collection, analysis, dissemination, and planning that went into the raid that killed Osama bin Laden. The American people received enormous return on investment that night and we are all grateful.

Failure of Imagination

Nevertheless, underestimating the intent and capability of AQAP, TTP, and Iran to strike the U.S. homeland represents very recent “failures of imagination.”

Such failure of imagination is something that the 9/11 Commission pointedly warned of following the 9/11 attacks:

The most important failure was one of imagination. We do not believe leaders understood the gravity of the threat. The terrorist danger from Bin Ladin and al Qaeda was not a major topic for policy debate among the public, the media, or in the Congress.... Though top officials all told us that they understood the danger, we believe there was uncertainty among them as to whether this was just a new ... version of the ordinary terrorist threat the United States had lived with for decades, or it was indeed radically new, posing a threat beyond any yet experienced.

Which brings us to today's topic—Boko Haram. I fear we may be falling into a similar trap with the rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria. In a little over a year, Boko Haram has evolved from a locally focused group with machetes to a transnational organization capable of conducting coordinated truck bombings against Western targets. That is why I issued our report and held a hearing: to begin a public discussion about Boko Haram and thoroughly examine its threat potential to the U.S. homeland.

Evolution of Boko Haram

Before our November hearing,

1. The discussion can be viewed at <http://www.heritage.org/events/2012/03/boko-haram>.

Boko Haram had been involved in a series of escalating attacks in Nigeria, most notably the truck bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria, in August. In the short time since that hearing, Boko Haram has continued its violent attacks, most notably in a series of coordinated bombings and gun attacks on churches during Christmas Day Mass that killed dozens. In early January 2012, the group conducted series of attacks on civilians, including roadside bombings, which killed nearly two hundred people.

Boko Haram has targeted police facilities and prisons in order to push for release of inmates to add to its ranks, reportedly stealing weapons and supplies wherever they can be found. This is the same playbook used by AQAP in Yemen, whose top leadership was either housed at Guantanamo or in Yemeni prisons before being released or escaping.

Just two weeks ago, Boko Haram bombed a fish market in what it claimed was retribution for merchants there assisting police in the capture of one of its members. The group's ambition, body count, and targets continue to expand, and I am deeply concerned that Boko Haram may soon target American interests in Nigeria.

The U.S.–Nigerian Bilateral Relationship

In a country with rampant corruption, a lagging economy, pervasive poverty, and heightened religious and ethnic tensions, Boko Haram has managed to expand its base of support and sympathy among northern Nigerians. Its violence appears likely to continue and increase in lethality in the short term. The United States must begin

the hard examination of the group as a potential threat to the U.S. homeland and take appropriate actions.

The United States and Nigeria have a robust and engaged strategic relationship. Nigeria is our largest trading partner in sub-Saharan Africa, largely due to the high level of petroleum imports from Nigeria, which account for 8 percent of U.S. oil imports—nearly half of Nigeria's daily oil production, much of which is refined in my congressional district.

Nigeria is the fifth-largest exporter of oil to the United States. U.S. foreign aid is helping to build Nigeria's capability to address threats to maritime security, including narcotics trafficking, building human rights capacity, and enhancing public trust in the security services. It is easy to see why Johnnie Carson, the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, has referred to Nigeria as “probably the most important country in sub-Saharan Africa.”

Those are just a few of the reasons that the spreading violence in Nigeria is cause for concern *here*, in the U.S.

Boko Haram: Collaborating with AQIM and al-Shabaab

What is perhaps most disturbing, is Boko Haram's reported links with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Somalia-based al-Shabaab, making it a potential force multiplier for a degraded, yet evolving and adapting al-Qaeda. If these links exist, gone are the days when Christmas Day bomber Abdulmutallab would have to fly to Yemen in order to join AQAP. Today, he could do so in the city of Kaduna in Nigeria, where he grew up, and where Boko Haram has carried out recent attacks.

High-profile captures of Boko Haram members have shed light on the group's leadership and internal divisions. Splintering factions within Boko Haram have begun to speak out against the reckless terrorism espoused by the leadership, indicating a leadership that is doggedly committed to waging an atrocious campaign of terror.

While the group's intentions are becoming more transparent, its funding remains obscure. Reports have surfaced stating that Boko Haram not only raises money through criminal operations, but also through donations from abroad and directly from AQIM.

Boko Haram's repeated displays of brutality, its intent to commit terror attacks against an expanding list of targets, and its relationships with al-Qaeda affiliates—all in a country of strategic significance to the U.S.—is an enormous counterterrorism and intelligence challenge.

Solutions

The conversation for those of us concerned with Boko Haram should now turn to an appropriate and measured response. In our subcommittee report, we urged increased American cooperation and training with Nigerian security forces and intelligence officials, as well as increased public engagement with northern Nigerian Muslims, among whom Boko Haram has found a sympathetic following. Public pressure has also been applied to various levels of the Nigerian government to fight corruption and improve good governance. These are positive developments. But, as we know from the many terrorism-related and nation-building missions since 9/11, these initiatives are hard and take time and sustained commitment. In an

environment of tightening budgets, prioritizing will be critical.

Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) Designation. Finally, I think that it is appropriate to consider adding Boko Haram to the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations. Such a designation could improve the ability of the United States Intelligence Community to assist Nigeria in fighting this group. I sent a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asking her to begin these deliberations, because it would allow enhanced capability on our part to limit the group's fundraising, and would send a message globally about

who the group is and about the danger it poses. Some experts and pundits believe the rise of Boko Haram is due to corruption and poverty. While that may be a small factor, I reject that justification. There should be no doubt about Boko Haram's goals: Any group that bombs churches during Christmas Day Mass has no regard for innocent lives and only sows fear and violence. We must have moral clarity about the enemies we face.

I trust that Secretary Clinton and the dedicated officials at the State Department are monitoring this threat, working closely with the Nigerians, and will designate Boko Haram a foreign

terrorist organization if it is deemed appropriate.

Once again, I would like to thank The Heritage Foundation for hosting me today on this important counterterrorism and intelligence issue. I think today's event reflects that a balanced conversation about the threat potential of Boko Haram is taking place. That in itself is an important step, and I look forward to continuing the conversation moving forward.

—*Representative Patrick Meehan (R-PA) chairs the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security.*