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Boko Haram: Addressing the Threat Before It Strikes

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Boko Haram, a Nigerian Islamist insurgency, is emerging as a threat not only to Nigeria, but also to the African continent and the United States. Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan has proven unable to address the growing security crisis that has targeted government officials, police forces, and hundreds of innocent civilians. Ongoing instability across the Sahel has also created an atmosphere ripe for tribal conflict, weapons proliferation, and terrorism. The region's mounting instability is facilitated by a cultural interconnectedness providing Boko Haram with access to terrorist and militant groups.

The United States should not overlook the threat Boko Haram poses to U.S. interests in the region and potentially to the homeland. Boko Haram's connections to terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and

al-Shabab in Somalia have provided militants with the means to wage deadly attacks against international facilities, as seen by the bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Abuja last August. The Obama Administration should not wait until a U.S. target is hit to take action.

Mismanagement of the Threat. Nigeria's government has mismanaged the Boko Haram insurgency through ham-handed and inconsistent measures. Prior to 2009, Boko Haram was a localized group. Operating primarily out of the Borno and Yobe states in northeastern Nigeria, Boko Haram rejects secularism and calls for the institution of sharia law throughout Nigeria.¹

Following the Nigerian government's crackdown on Boko Haram in August 2009 that killed more than 700 people, including the extrajudicial killing and martyrdom of Boko Haram leader Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram mobilized and sought support from partners across the Sahel. A year later, a reenergized Boko Haram launched its deadly campaign against Nigerian government officials, security forces, and innocent civilians—Christians and Muslims alike.²

The Nigerian government's poor response to the north's dire

economic and security conditions has fueled resentment, making many young men vulnerable to Boko Haram recruiters. Northern Nigerians are significantly marginalized and are not provided the same economic opportunities and benefits that those in the rest of the country enjoy. Approximately 76 percent of northerners live on less than a dollar per day. Schools are under-financed, and the standard of education is so poor that graduates are often unfit for employment.³

Nigeria's security forces aggravate this resentment with unprofessional and abusive conduct that often foders instability. Innocent civilians are often bullied by police at checkpoints; their houses are searched and ransacked without just cause, and they are often beaten, arrested, and tortured on suspicion of extremist activity. Considering the long-standing political tensions between the Christian South and the Muslim North, abuse by security forces under the control of a Christian president does little to stifle northern anger. Such offenses inspire Nigerians sympathetic to Boko Haram to join the Boko Haram insurgency.

Abuja's lack of a counterterrorism strategy has failed to address Boko Haram's long-term threat. The

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Nigerian government has haphazardly experimented with a variety of different tactics, including negotiations with intermediaries, declaring a state of emergency in Yobe, Plateau, and Borno states, and increased military presence. Yet Boko Haram continues to wage daily attacks.

Not Just a Nigerian Problem. The instability brought on by the “Arab Spring” last year, specifically with the collapse of the Qadhafi regime in Libya, has created a political vacuum across the Sahel. Weapons proliferation, armed violence by Tuareg rebels, and a food

shortage have added to the region’s already challenging atmosphere.

AQIM is one of the main beneficiaries of such instability. Although the organization’s original objective is the dismantling of the Algerian government, AQIM has evolved into a transnational organization operating

1. As a bi-religious country, Nigeria’s south is predominately Christian, whereas the north is Muslim. All 12 states in northern Nigeria instituted sharia law in 1999.
2. Little is known about the internal dynamics of Boko Haram. However, Dr. Ricardo Larémont, professor at the State University of New York at Binghamton, posits the existence of three Boko Haram factions. The first, headed by Abubakar Shakau, Yusuf’s deputy, is said to be the ideological branch and open to negotiation with the Nigerian government. The second faction is supported by northern state and local government officials, whose objective is to expose the federal government’s incompetence. The third group is a criminal faction that uses AQIM tactics (e.g., kidnapping for ransom) to turn a profit. See Ricardo René Larémont, “Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and the Al-Shabab,” testimony before the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives, November 30, 2011, at <http://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=693041> (March 21, 2012).
3. International Crisis Group, “Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict,” Africa Report No. 168, December 20, 2010, p. 10, at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/africa/west-africa/nigeria/168%20Northern%20Nigeria%20-%20Background%20to%20Conflict.aspx> (March 21, 2012).

across the Sahel. The security vacuum created by Libya has made it easier for AQIM to destabilize the region, thus expanding its influence—hence, its engagement with Boko Haram. While Boko Haram and AQIM possess separate interests, the relationship is mutually beneficial—Boko Haram militants are trained and resourced, and AQIM has an established connection in Nigeria.

U.S. Action. The ongoing instability in Nigeria and the region has significant implications for U.S. interests. Nigeria is the fourth largest oil producer for the United States—the U.S. imports more oil from Nigeria than from any other country in Africa. As of September 2011, the U.S. imported more than half a million barrels of Nigerian oil per day.⁴ As the most populous country in Africa, Nigeria has the largest peacekeeping force on the continent, contributing to the stabilization of Darfur, South Sudan, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁵ As the Sahel’s destabilization creeps toward Nigeria and Boko Haram aligns itself with terrorist and militant groups, Nigeria’s security situation could quickly deteriorate.

Boko Haram’s high-profile attack against the United Nations headquarters in Abuja last August was a turning point for the organization. In addition to embarrassing the Nigerian government for not being able to protect a high-profile target,

Boko Haram made its intentions clear: Any government or organization that supports the Nigerian government is a potential target.⁶

Weeks before the bombing, General Carter Ham, head of the U.S. Africa Command, warned of Boko Haram’s affiliation with African terrorist organizations. Boko Haram’s increasing use of al-Qaeda tactics (e.g., improvised explosive devices) exemplifies Boko Haram’s ambitions. As emphasized by a report by the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence of the House Homeland Security Committee, Boko Haram should not be underestimated.⁷ Other organizations such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP) were not thoroughly examined until attacks were waged against the homeland.

Next Steps. Boko Haram’s attacks, though intended to weaken the Nigerian government, have an indirect impact on the United States. While it is unlikely that Boko Haram currently possesses the will or capabilities to attack the U.S. directly, this does not mean the organization’s ambitions will not expand in the future. As such, the Obama Administration should take the necessary steps:

■ **Explore the designation of Boko Haram as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.** Some

diplomats fear such a designation would deter the Nigerian government from pursuing reforms in the north. However, refusing to consider this option could imperil U.S. security in the long term.

- **Partner with Nigeria’s federal, state, and local governments in the north to address standards of development.** Abuja’s failure to address economic and societal conditions has created a resentful population vulnerable to Islamic extremism. Improving such conditions will assist in legitimizing the federal government in the north.
- **Establish a consular office in northern Nigeria.** A U.S. diplomatic presence would provide improved access to information collection and assist in engaging a society that is far removed from the south.
- **Urge the Nigerian government to practice restraint in its use of military force.** The mistreatment of innocent civilians is counterproductive and results in unintended consequences.
- **Hold the Nigerian government accountable for misuse of funding for counterterrorism and military training.** Considering Nigeria’s endemic

4. “Crude Oil and Total Petroleum Imports Top 15 Countries,” U.S. Energy Information Administration, September 2011, at http://www.eia.gov/pub/oil_gas/petroleum/data_publications/company_level_imports/current/import.html (March 21, 2012).

5. As of January 2012, Nigeria provides 726 peacekeepers to U.N. missions. United Nations Peacekeeping, “Police and Troop Contributions,” at <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/contributors.shtml> (March 21, 2012), and United Nations Peacekeeping, Country Contributions Detailed by Mission, December 2011, p. 24, at http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/contributors_archive.shtml (March 21, 2012).

6. Jamestown Foundation, “Can Nigeria Exploit the Split in the Boko Haram Movement?” *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 9, No. 36, (September 22, 2011), at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4e8045502.html> (March 21, 2012).

7. U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, “Boko Haram: Emerging Threat to the U.S. Homeland,” November 30, 2011, at <http://homeland.house.gov/sites/homeland.house.gov/files/Boko%20Haram-%20Emerging%20Threat%20to%20the%20US%20Homeland.pdf> (March 21, 2012).

corruption, the Administration should implement measures to track U.S. assistance carefully.

By taking preventive measures against Boko Haram, the Obama Administration will be better equipped to counter a threat before it strikes.

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