

## **To Be Or Not To Be: Is Boko Haram a Foreign Terrorist Organization?**

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### **Abstract**

Nigerian uprising organization, Boko Haram, is under investigation in order to determine if the United States should classify it as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. Boko Haram's objective is to overthrow the secular Nigerian Government and enforce a Sharia law based government however, when they targeted the United Nations Headquarters' building in Abuja, Nigeria, it may have signified a change in targets from local to international. Boko Haram is examined in contrast with the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), a Nigerian grassroots movement group, as well as defined terrorist organizations, al Shabaab and al-Qaeda Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as a way to determine if Boko Haram is fundamentally a Foreign Terrorist Organization.

**Key Words:** Boko Haram, Nigeria, Foreign Terrorist Organization, Terrorism, Uprising

### **Introduction**

The United Nations Headquarters' building in Abuja, Nigeria, fell victim to a suicide vehicle- borne improvised exploding device (V-IED) attack carried out by Nigerian rebel group, Boko Haram, in August 2011. The question is, does a successful transnational attack mean that Boko Haram should now be classified as a Foreign Terrorist Organization? In order to understand the threat Boko Haram poses to the United States, it is important to first understand the group as a whole. Little is known about the organization at this time, but according to the current analysis Boko Haram closely resembles the beginnings of the al-Qaeda splinter group al-Qaeda Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and other terrorist organizations such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and al Shabaab which unexpectedly became increasingly more radicalized (Rep. Patrick Meehan).

It is essential to global security that Boko Haram's force is not underestimated. AQAP and TTP had similar starts as localized radical anti-government movements and were overlooked by intelligence communities because of the misjudgment that the sects imposed no real danger to U.S. targets. They were quickly proven wrong, when a series of attempted attacks planned, directed, and executed by these two groups were thwarted on Christmas Day 2009 on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 over Detroit, and in May 2010 in New York City's Times Square. Given the ability of these other groups to become operational with apparently meager resources, it would be prudent for the U.S. Government to thoroughly and carefully examine the extent of the threat from Boko Haram to the U.S. Homeland (Rep. Patrick Meehan).

## **Background**

The Maiduguri, Nigerian based organization Boko Haram was founded in 1995 by Abubakah Lawan under the original name Ahlulsunna wal'jama'ah hijra. Lawan's mission was to call the government's attention to the economic hardship and poor living standards the Nigerian people faced. Lawan "later left the country for studies at the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia" (Onuoha). A charismatic radicalized Muslim cleric named Muhammad Yusuf assumed the position of leader and renamed the group Boko Haram. "The term 'Boko Haram' (western education is forbidden) comes from the Hausa word boko meaning, 'Animist, western or otherwise non-Islamic education' and the Arabic word haram figuratively meaning, 'sin' (literally, 'forbidden')" (naijagists.com). Yusuf, a Wahabbist Scholar, established a religious complex containing a mosque and an Islamic school where many lower class families in Nigeria sent their children. Unfortunately, the school became a breeding ground for the recruitment of young jihadists into the Boko Haram organization (Onuoha).

Since Yusuf's influence, Boko Haram's principle objective has been to overthrow the secular Nigerian Government and enforce an anti-Western Sharia law based government. Up until the mid to late 2000's, the organization was relatively quiet with little activity. The attacks in Kannama on government and police buildings in 2004 seem to be the first outward presentation of Boko Haram's mission. Again, in 2009, the organization carried out a much larger attack on a prison in Bauchi, Nigeria. This attack was the beginning of a five-day stand off which resulted in the deaths of over seven hundred people including the leader, Muhammad Yusuf. There had been several other attacks within Nigeria; however, it was not until the 2011 attack on the United Nations headquarters in Abuja that Boko Haram became more of an international interest. Not only did Boko Haram become a transnational concern, but the attack also marks the notable shift from strictly Nigerian to multi-national targets.

## **Structure**

Boko Haram's cell-like command structure remains somewhat unclear; however, after Muhammad Yusuf's death in 2009, Mallam Abubakar Shekau, became the leader of the sect. Two deputies served under Yusuf's leadership, and on the next rung of the ladder, each state with a Boko Haram presence has its own commander called an Amir (Onuoha). Below the regional Amirs are the local Amirs followed by each sect's jihadist recruits(Onuoha). With the synergy of al-Qaeda and al Shabaab in recent months, this structure has probably warped into a much larger network with several working cells across Nigeria.

## **Funding**

Funding for Boko Haram's activities are still being uncovered. In the beginning, members had to pay a daily levy of 100 naira to their leader. This provided the basic source of funding for the sect, in addition to donations from politicians, government officials and other individuals or organizations within Nigeria... Bunu Wakil a contractor and an indigene of Borno State (currently detained) is alleged to be the main financier of the Islamic sect. (Onuoha)

A significant amount of funding also comes from the crimes themselves; bank robberies are not an uncommon practice for Boko Haram. More recently and perhaps more alarmingly, it has been determined that al-Qaeda is now involved in contributing funds supporting the organization's activities (NDUKONG). In August of 2011 "Boko Haram leadership traveled to Saudi Arabia to discuss financial and logistical operations with al-Qaeda leaders" (Epperson). The financial alliance between the two groups as well as the recent transnational UN building target may be enough evidence to support the theory of Boko Haram's shift from a strictly Nigerian based anti-government sect to an international terrorist organization.

### **FTO Affiliation/ Training**

Spokesmen on behalf of both Boko Haram and al-Qaeda Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have confirmed collaboration between the two groups. A concerning aspect of this relationship is that AQIM's leader, Abu Musab Abd al-Wadoud, proclaimed his intent "to supply it [*Boko Haram*] with weapons to 'defend Muslims in Nigeria and stop the advance of a minority of Crusaders'. He further noted that al-Qaeda has an interest in sub-Saharan Africa" (Onuoha). The reality of this weapons exchange may be closer than expected, for after the overthrow of Libya's leader, Gaddafi, "stockpiles of missiles and other arms were looted and quite possibly fell into the hands of AQIM members who could pass off some of the weaponry to Boko Haram affiliates" (Al-Tamimi). The consequences of this exchange and collaboration pose a larger than originally perceived threat to the international community.

Boko Haram has admitted to sending its members to train with AQIM and al Shabaab terrorist organizations. During training with AQIM, Boko Haram members mastered the skills of bomb making practices (Epperson). Prior to the United Nations building attack, and perhaps in preparation for it, Boko Haram militants also attended al Shabaab owned training camps in Somalia. Members were taught how to construct and detonate improvised exploding devices, as well as employ the use of suicide bombers, which until participating in the training camps, Boko Haram did not engage such practices (Epperson). Similar use of communication technology and media began to emerge in the organization's tactics. Boko Haram began using internet forums as a means for expansion and recruitment as well as a source of information sharing. Following in al Shabaab's footsteps, Boko Haram used the forums to "increase the group's legitimacy among the jihadi community" (Rep. Patrick Meehan). After the joint training, there is an obvious change in both targets and techniques used by Boko Haram.

### **Changes in Boko Haram**

The increasing sophistication of tactics and shift of interest to international targets may be a significant foresight into the extent of collaboration between Boko Haram, al Shabaab and AQIM terrorist organizations. Before cross organization training, Boko Haram focused energy on targeting local police, Nigerian Government buildings, military affiliated personnel and facilities, churches, schools and the like (Epperson). However, after terrorist training, targets and practices became much more inline with that of AQIM and al Shabaab. This is obvious when comparing the July 2009 violent uprising and five-day stand off against the police in Bauchi, Nigeria, versus the United Nations building attack in 2011. Clearly the attack on the police

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station was not thoroughly planned nor organized when assessing the massive amount of the group's casualties to include the organization's leader, Muhammad Yusuf. However, after the leader's death and the synthesis of the groups, Boko Haram successfully planned and carried out a much more symbolic attack representing its shift from a strictly Nigerian rebel group to a possible internationally recognized terrorist organization.

More recently, Boko Haram successfully carried out eight coinciding attacks on security offices in Kano, Nigeria, to include, "the Zone 1 Police Headquarters, the State Security Service Headquarters, the State Police Command Headquarters, the office of the Zone 1 Police Assistant Inspector General (AIG), the Office of Immigration and Naturalization, the Kano Immigration Services Office, and the Zaria and Farm Center police stations", on January 20, 2012 (ISVG). Although these attacks involved strictly Nigerian targets, the successfully planned orchestration and infiltration of this immense size, demonstrates the extent of the group's growing capabilities. The operational techniques involved suicide bombers and IED's now, a known signature tactic of the sect, learned from their terrorist organization mentors.

### **FTO Designation**

Since the United Nations building attack, the main questions on policy makers' minds are: Was the transnational target a one-time event or a true shift of ideology for Boko Haram? Is Boko a threat to the security of the United States? Should it (Boko Haram) be classified as a foreign terrorist organization? When evaluating these questions, one must consider the foundation of the terrorist ideology, which is to instill widespread fear. Undoubtedly, Boko Haram has successfully fulfilled that mission. According to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence:

The legal criteria for Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation includes the following:

1. It must be a foreign organization.
2. The organization must engage in terrorist activity, as defined in section 212 (a)(3)(B) of the INA (8 U.S.C. § 1182(a)(3)(B)),\* or terrorism, as defined in section 140(d)(2) of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1988 and 1989 (22 U.S.C. § 2656f(d)(2)),\*\* or retain the capability and intent to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism.
3. The organization's terrorist activity or terrorism must threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national security (national defense, foreign relations, or the economic interests) of the United States. (Rep. Patrick Meehan)

Considering this outline for FTO designation, undeniably, Boko Haram falls into this category. They are a foreign organization. They have a proven track record of engagement in terrorist activities. They have an obvious "intent to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism" (Rep. Patrick Meehan). And finally, their activity has threatened the security of U.S. nationals. Arrogantly, "The perpetrator of the [United Nations building] attack described the U.N. as a forum for 'all global evil' and stated the attacks were designed to 'send a message to the U.S. President and 'other infidels' " (Rep. Patrick Meehan). The alignment with AQIM and al Shabaab speaks for itself as a true shift of radical ideological expansion. However, more analysis

must be done in order to understand the full scope of the commitment Boko Haram has to the jihad mission.

## **Arguments**

Opposers of the FTO designation perceive Boko Haram as “little more than a grassroots insurrection with no defined leader or structure” (Rep. Patrick Meehan). Some even believe that the FTO designation could have negative implications for the U.S. and Nigerian partnership especially when it comes to combating this sect. John Campbell, Ralph Bunche Senior Fellow for Africa Policy, Council on Foreign Relations, suggests that “It [Boko Haram] could acquire a jihadist character, and the way it could is if the United States is seen as supportive of Nigerian security approaches to Boko Haram” (Campbell). Boko Haram would be the first terrorist organization to be associated with Nigeria and harboring terrorists is not an identity with which the Nigerian Government wants to be associated.

## **Grassroots Comparison**

Another way of determining how Boko Haram should be classified is by comparing it with a Nigerian grassroots rebel group with a similar foundation. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) is a Nigerian based uprising fighting for the rights of average, local citizens against the government. MEND also rebels against the current status quo of the southern Nigerian oil industry (RBoales@isvg.org). It is their belief that the wealth of the oil profits should be used to help better the lives of the Nigerian people and help to create economic stability (RBoales@isvg.org). Both groups essentially want the same thing for the Nigerian people, a better life with a legitimate stable government. However, the means by which they go about achieving this goal are very different. MEND has a decentralized leadership and organizational structure, and their targets typically include buildings and oil related infrastructure (RBoales@isvg.org). They also use direct fire weaponry to conduct their operations (RBoales@isvg.org). Boko Haram, on the other hand, has a strong central leadership structure with the backing of established terrorist organizations (RBoales@isvg.org). They target people and meaningful structures, utilizing suicide bombers and devices such as IEDs. As similar as the two groups’ foundational objectives are, their means of destruction in Nigeria are very different. When comparing the two groups, Boko Haram resembles a terrorist sect much more than it does a grassroots uprising.

## **FTO Support**

Boko Haram is paralleling operations and ideals that mirror previously defined terrorist organizations. The increase in the sophistication of tactics and the successful missions carried out against the Nigerian Government and the United Nations building should be viewed as warnings of the types of attacks that Boko Haram is capable of in the future. With each outbreak of violence the group grows more powerful, confident, and experienced in effective terrorist activity. The designation of Foreign Terrorist Organization does not seem like it would have a downfall in this situation; if anything it will bring the awareness and attention needed to focus on this quickly evolving group in order to stop possible future attacks, especially ones involving the United States and its citizens. It is essential that the understanding of this group’s operations are

evident before Boko Haram becomes further immersed in the AQIM and al Shabaab terror circle.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The key to stopping Boko Haram is working with the Nigerian government to formulate the proper intelligence collection sharing plan in order to prevent attacks before they occur. Intelligence gathering on this sect has to be made a priority for the safety of future targets. It is vital that Nigeria and the United States work as a team in order to make any progress against Boko Haram; this includes intelligence gathering and sharing, military cooperation, and the development of effective counter terrorism measures. Once missions become more and more unsuccessful, it should deter the group from continuing in such acts of terror. Nigeria has to work with its allies to devise a plan to derail Boko Haram's anti- government movement. This of course goes in partnership with working to create a strengthened legitimate Nigerian Government in order to deter its citizens from participation in such anti-government uprisings. The Nigerian Government needs to move in a direction of learning and understanding the needs and interests of its citizens.

### **Summary**

It is imperative that Nigeria take the threats of Boko Haram very seriously; if they do not learn more about this sect and its operations, the Nigerian Government could face grave danger. The affiliations Boko Haram has established with the terrorist organizations AQIM and al Shabaab should be reason enough for further intelligence gathering. Further more, al-Qaeda sects thrive in poorly governed areas; the toxic relationship being manifested with Boko Haram creates a prime atmosphere for expansion. The possibility of a collaborative attack between the groups could affect the well-being of nations across the world. The seriousness of the threat Boko Haram poses cannot be stressed enough. The only outcome to ignoring their threat involves grave consequences for Nigeria, and for global security.

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