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**Roundtable on the Sahel — Boko Haram:  
Understanding Domestic and Regional  
Security Challenges**

Dorina A. Bekoe

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Dorina A. Bekoe

## Executive Summary

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The presence of the Islamic sect Boko Haram has led to the most severe security crisis in Nigeria since the Biafran civil war of 1967–1970. Since 2009, Boko Haram in northern Nigeria has launched more than 700 attacks, which have claimed the lives of more than 3,000 people. The recent crisis in Mali and the May 14 state of emergency declaration in Nigeria’s three northeastern states of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe have heightened the concern for the threat that Boko Haram poses to the country and the region. To discuss these developments, the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) Africa Program, through the *Roundtable on the Sahel* series, organized a May 17, 2013, meeting on Boko Haram. This report summarizes the main points of the discussion, which took place under Chatham House rules, a core principle that governs the confidentiality of the source of information received at a meeting.

The persistently poor economic and social indicators of northeastern Nigeria have fueled Boko Haram’s expansion. The grievances are not new, but the level of violence exacted by Boko Haram and its clashes with Nigeria’s security services are unprecedented. There are also concerns that Boko Haram is being assisted by external militant groups and may start to reach out to targets outside Nigeria.

In addition to failing to defeat Boko Haram, the Nigerian security forces have committed a large number of atrocities and are poorly equipped. They are also deeply distrusted by the local population, which also fears Boko Haram. Therefore, it is unlikely that the local population will assist the government in defeating the insurgency.

Even though Boko Haram has targeted Nigerian government and security officials and symbols, Ansaru—a splinter group—has focused almost exclusively on Westerners. However, experts are divided on the extent and durability of the split and whether Ansaru will push Boko Haram to strike outside the country.

To defuse Boko Haram’s threat successfully, considerable attention should be paid to the context in which Boko Haram operates, to reforming the Nigerian security services, and to forming partnerships with neighboring states.

## **Introduction**

Nigeria, considered West Africa's political and economic hegemon, is undergoing its most severe security crises since the Biafran civil war of 1967–1970. Accordingly, some fear that the inability to resolve or manage the security challenge posed by Boko Haram could reverberate in the region. As a militant organization, Boko Haram has been in existence since 2003, but it has come to the attention of the larger international community only since 2009—a year that marks a distinct break in Boko Haram's history. Since 2009, the Nigerian army has aggressively targeted Boko Haram members, and Boko Haram has staged ever more violent attacks in Nigeria. The recent crisis in Mali, which brought the influence of Islamic extremists in the Sahel to the fore, and concerns about possible links between Boko Haram and other Islamic extremists have increased the international community's focus on the group. On May 14, 2013, Nigeria's president Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency in the three northeastern states of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe, which heightened the concern that Boko Haram poses to the country and the region.

In view of these concerns, on May 17, 2013, the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) Africa Program, through the *Roundtable on the Sahel* series, organized a meeting on Boko Haram. The *Roundtable on the Sahel* series seeks to bring together regional and country experts to discuss critical political developments in the Sahel and to further the understanding of individual countries within the region, intra-Sahelian political and social dynamics, and interregional African relations. The meeting participants focused on discussing the current efforts by the Nigerian government to curtail Boko Haram, assessing the threat of Boko Haram to the region's security, and understanding the roles of the neighboring states in facilitating or confronting Boko Haram.

This report summarizes the main points of the discussion, which took place under Chatham House rules, a core principle that governs the confidentiality of the source of information received at a meeting. The discussions provided the context of Boko Haram's origins, elaborated on the response by the Nigerian government (in view of current political dynamics), examined the splintering of the movement, analyzed the capacity of the Nigerian army, and considered the impact of the militant group on the region.

## **Understanding the Boko Haram Insurgency**

According to the participants at the meeting, the economic, political, and social conditions in northeast Nigeria enabled Boko Haram to flourish. Northeast Nigeria has been plagued by severe poverty (70 percent of the region's population lives on less than a dollar a day, compared to 50 and 59 percent in southwest and southeast, respectively) and

has the highest national rates of malnutrition among children.<sup>1</sup> Unemployment is also higher in the northeast, where it is 33 percent compared to the national average of 23.9 percent.<sup>2</sup> Adding to the strain on resources, one expert remarked that the Northeast's youth have little prospects for employment or educational opportunity. Other grievances include the predominance of corruption; perceived unequal resource sharing; and the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of intercommunal cycles, which have killed Christians and Muslims.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, these issues are not new, and a number of groups have formed over the years to protest them. However, one participant noted that the difference with Boko Haram is the use of violence in addressing them.

Despite the publicity surrounding Boko Haram's attacks, not much is known about their internal organization or its members, which makes it difficult to begin a process of negotiation. It is not clear who would represent Boko Haram at peace talks, and President Jonathan alluded to this conundrum when explaining why amnesty had not been offered in the past, saying, "... nobody has agreed that he is a Boko Haram member, no one has come forward. If amnesty can solve the situation, then no problem. But nobody has come forward to make himself visible."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as one participant framed it, Boko Haram is more of a brand than an organization. Violent acts are committed not only in Boko Haram's name, but also by Boko Haram itself.

## **The Nigerian Government's Response to Boko Haram**

The Nigerian security services have not succeeded in defeating Boko Haram militarily. Some thought that the military had successfully beaten Boko Haram after five days of violent clashes in July 2009, which left 800 people dead, including Boko Haram's leader Muhammad Yusuf.<sup>5</sup> However, by 2010, Boko Haram had resurged under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, declaring that it was ready to avenge the deaths of its members.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, since Boko Haram's first attack under Shekau in September 2010, approximately 3,000 people have died in more than 700 attacks in northern Nigeria.<sup>7</sup> Still

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Spiraling Violence: Boko Haram Attacks and Security Force Abuses in Nigeria," October 11, 2012, 27.

<sup>2</sup> African Development Bank Group, "Federal Republic of Nigeria: Country Strategy Paper, 2013–2017," January 2013, 5, <http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Project-and-Operations/Nigeria%20-%202013-2017%20-%20Country%20Strategy%20Paper.pdf>.

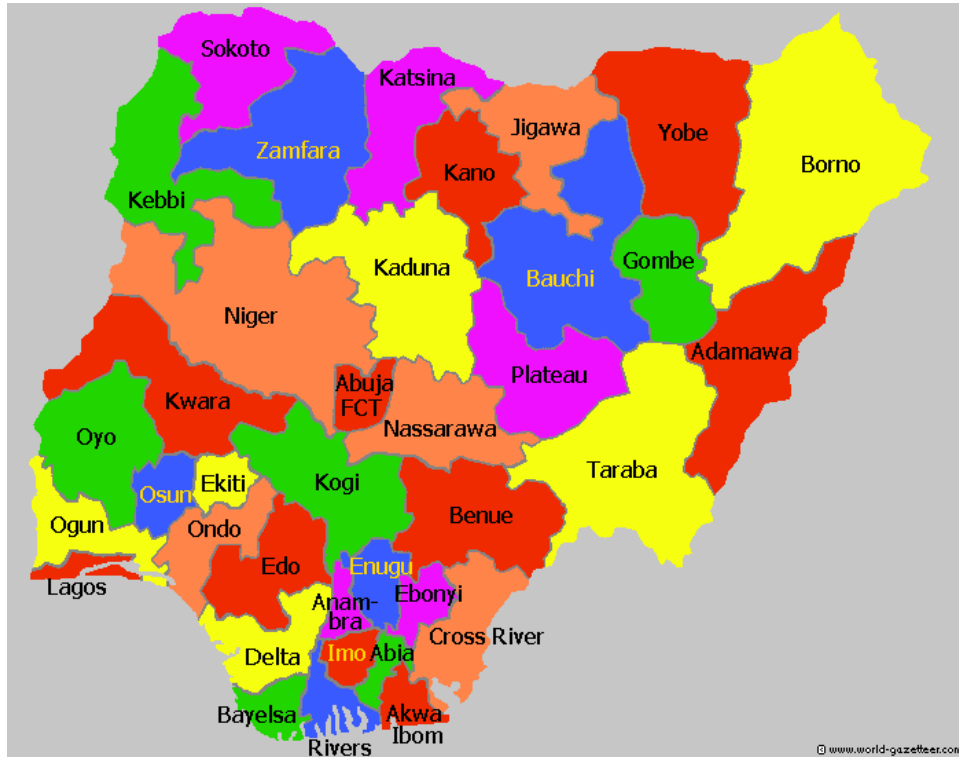
<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Spiraling Violence: Boko Haram Attacks and Security Force Abuses in Nigeria," October 11, 2012, 24–29.

<sup>4</sup> Ndahi Marama, "Jonathan in Boko Haram Strongholds: I Can't Declare Amnesty for Ghosts," *Vanguard*, March 8, 2013, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/03/jonathan-in-boko-haram-strongholds-i-cant-declare-amnesty-for-ghosts/>.

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Spiraling Violence: Boko Haram Attacks and Security Force Abuses in Nigeria," October 11, 2012, 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

unable to defeat Boko Haram, the Nigerian government has declared a state of emergency in Adamawa, Yobe, and Borno, the three northeastern states most affected by the insurgency (see Figure 1).



Source: <http://www.nigeriahc.org.uk/about-nigeria>.

**Figure 1. The 36 Nigerian States**

The state of emergency's main strategy is to increase the military presence in those three states. The addition of even more Nigerian military forces is problematic because of the massive abuses committed by the Nigerian armed forces. As some participants noted, the Nigerian security forces are poorly equipped, do not speak the local languages, and are frequent targets of Boko Haram. In short, they are part of the problem. Another participant noted that the apparent distance between security forces and the local population resulted from the trauma of the 1967–1970 Biafran civil war, which threatened the Nigerian state. Following the civil war, the deployment of police and other security services was centralized to discourage collusion between security forces and the local population. However, another unanticipated result is that the security forces still remain culturally isolated from the population that they are meant to protect. The Nigerian security forces' low capacity, distance from the local population, and

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<sup>7</sup> Jacob Zenn, "Cooperation or Competition: Boko Haram and Ansaru after the Mali Intervention," *CTC Sentinel*, March 27, 2013, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/cooperation-or-competition-boko-haram-and-ansaru-after-the-mali-intervention>; Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's International Connections," *CTC Sentinel*, January 14, 2013, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/boko-harams-international-connections>.

heavy-handed military response, coupled with Boko Haram's violence, have made the local population fear both groups. They will not seek protection from the Nigerian army nor will they cooperate to undermine Boko Haram.

In addition, the true purpose of the declaration of the state of emergency was unclear. To some participants, it appeared to serve as the start and theme of the Jonathan reelection campaign. Others, noting Jonathan's mentioning of the insurgency's preference of "strange flags" over Nigeria's flag, felt that it served as a means of drawing the attention and possible involvement of the international community<sup>8</sup> It seems to suggest that the instability that occurred in Mali, facilitated by the infiltration of outside extremists groups, may repeat in Nigeria. In the event that the latter explanation is correct, one panelist warned that it could draw the international community—the United States, in particular—into Nigerian domestic politics. Such a close association with Jonathan, especially given the great difficulty he has encountered in effectively governing Nigeria, could be problematic for United States' leverage in Nigeria and the region. However, as will be elaborated below, the experts are divided over the extent to which Nigeria's extremist violence will spread beyond its borders or will be reinforced by outsiders.

A number of splinter groups are complicating efforts to contain the insurgency. While Nigerian state and security symbols have been the target for Boko Haram, other groups have targeted Westerners. Ansaru, the most high profile of these groups, speaks better Arabic (given that the lingua franca of northern Nigeria is Hausa, which some thought suggested an outside influence), is more cosmopolitan, seems better educated, and has started using anti-Zionist rhetoric. Nonetheless, experts disagree over the depth of the split, especially because there seems to be some cooperation between the groups.

## **Regional Linkages**

The 2009 clash between Boko Haram and Nigerian security forces that left Muhammad Yusuf dead was a turning point for the group. Not only did Shekau resolve to avenge the death of Yusuf and the other Muslims killed in the clashes, but the clash also presented opportunities for possible links to outside extremist groups. Tellingly, one participant noted, Abdelmalek Droukdel, the leader of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), stated that AQIM sympathized with Boko Haram's cause and promised assistance.<sup>9</sup> It showed that Droukdel was paying attention. According to one expert at the meeting, AQIM subsequently took Boko Haram members into its ranks and, in exchange

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<sup>8</sup> Greg Bothelo, "Nigerian President Declares Emergency in 3 States During 'Rebellion,'" May 14, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/05/14/world/africa/nigeria-violence>.

<sup>9</sup> There are many references to this statement. See, for example, J. Peter Pham, "Boko Haram's Evolving Threat," *Africa Security Brief, Africa Center for Security Studies* 20 (April 2012): 3, [http://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/AfricaBriefFinal\\_20.pdf](http://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/AfricaBriefFinal_20.pdf).



for financial assistance to Boko Haram, provided training in kidnapping and launching attacks.

The January 2012 split in Boko Haram that created Ansaru may also reflect an outside orientation. While superficially the split may appear to be about a difference in attitude concerning the collateral killing of civilians and Muslims during attacks (Ansaru has denounced Boko Haram for both), it may more likely reflect a divergence with Boko Haram's near exclusive focus on Nigeria.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Ansaru seems to espouse a broader purpose. Rather than focusing on avenging the death of Yusuf and the hundreds of Muslims who perished in that same fight, Ansaru aims to restore the glory days of the Sokoto Caliphate, founded by Usman dan Fodio and destroyed by the introduction of colonialism. In this regard, one participant asserted, Ansaru aims to take Nigeria back 200 years. Another participant underscored that the focus on Sokoto is significant because it has been the traditional bulwark against Westernization.

So far, Ansaru is likely responsible for six attacks (as far back as May 2011, before the formal split). However, only four can be verified. Of the six operations, four have involved the kidnapping of foreigners either in Nigeria or at the border with Niger, one was an assault on a convoy carrying 180 Nigerian soldiers, and one was an attack on the Special Anti-Robbery Squad prison in Abuja that freed several of Boko Haram's senior leaders.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, the split appears superficial to some analysts. Possibly expanding beyond Nigerian targets, Boko Haram kidnapped a French family in northern Cameroon in February 2013, for which they received \$3 million in ransom. Furthermore, one participant explained, Boko Haram seems to be managing its image by blaming Nigeria's security services for the deaths of civilians and Muslims caught in the cross-fire of clashes. One participant suggested that this approach might mend the split with Ansaru.

## **Conclusion**

The May 17, 2013, meeting discussed the Nigerian government's efforts to curtail Boko Haram's insurgency, assessed the threat Boko Haram posed to regional security, and examined the roles of the neighboring states in combating Boko Haram. Considerable attention was paid to the role of Nigeria's security services and the possible regional linkages between Boko Haram and other insurgent groups in the region.

In particular, there was considerable agreement that the Nigerian security services' heavy-handed approach to managing the threat posed by Boko Haram was not working. The security services need to develop a strategy and protocol, improve community

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<sup>10</sup> Jacob Zenn, "Cooperation or Competition: Boko Haram and Ansaru After the Mali Intervention, March 27, 2013, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/cooperation-or-competition-boko-haram-and-ansaru-after-the-mali-intervention>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

relations, attend to the needs of the community, and form strategic partnerships with neighboring countries. Furthermore, while there seem to be linkages to other extremist groups in the region, some cautioned against overemphasizing such connections. They reminded the group that the main grievances voiced by Boko Haram are against the Nigerian state and the security services. However, if the Nigerian government fails to counter Boko Haram, some warned of a regionalization of the violence, given the porous national borders.



**IDA Africa Program  
Roundtable on the Sahel  
Boko Haram: Understanding Domestic and Regional Security Challenges**

**Cosmos Club  
2121 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20008  
Friday, May 17, 2013**

**AGENDA**

- 9:30 a.m.–9:45 a.m.:** Welcome and Introduction  
*Dorina Bekoe, IDA Africa Program*
- 9:45 a.m.–10:30 a.m.:** Panel presentations  
*Caroline Ziemke-Dickens, IDA Africa Program*  
*Jacob Zenn, Jamestown Foundation*  
  
Discussant: *John Paden, George Mason University*
- 10:30 a.m.–10:45 a.m.:** Break
- 10:45 a.m.–12:00 p.m.:** Discussion session  
Moderator: *Dorina Bekoe, IDA Africa Program*
- 12:00 p.m.–1:00 p.m.** Working Lunch

**IDA Africa Program  
Roundtable on the Sahel  
Boko Haram: Understanding Domestic and Regional Security Challenges  
Friday, May 17, 2013  
9:30 a.m.–12:00 p.m.**

**BIOGRAPHIES**

**Dorina Bekoe**

Dorina A. Bekoe is a Research Staff Member in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA). She specializes in Africa's conflicts, political development, institutional reform (including the New Partnership for Africa's Development and its related African Peer Review Mechanism), peace agreements, and electoral violence. Her most recent book is *Voting in Fear: Electoral Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa* (USIP Press, 2012), an edited volume. She is also the author of *Implementing Peace Agreements: Lessons from Mozambique, Angola, and Liberia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and the editor of *East Africa and the Horn: Confronting Challenges to Good Governance* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005). She has a B.A. in Economics from Franklin and Marshall College, an M.S. in Public Policy from Carnegie Mellon University, and a Ph.D. in Public Policy from Harvard University.

**John Paden**

Dr. Paden is Clarence Robinson Professor of International Studies at George Mason University (GMU), where he reports directly to the Provost. He was a Philosophy major at Occidental College, a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, and earned his Ph.D. at Harvard in Politics. Dr. Paden has served as Norman Dwight Harris Professor of International Studies and Director of African Studies at Northwestern University and a Professor of Public Administration at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria, and was the Founding Dean, Faculty of Social and Management Sciences at Bayero University in Kano, Nigeria. He has worked in the Hausa-speaking Muslim areas of northern Nigeria over the past forty years, and was part of a team that helped plan the new Nigerian federal "unity" capital in Abuja. He served as an international observer during the Nigerian presidential elections of 1999 (Kaduna), 2003 (Kano), and 2007 (Katsina).

Some of his earlier Nigeria-related books include *Religion and Political Culture in Kano* (winner of the Herskovits prize) and *Ahmadu Bello, Sardauna of Sokoto: Values and Leadership in Nigeria*. More recent books include *Muslim Civic Cultures and Conflict Resolution: The Challenge of Democratic Federalism in Nigeria* (Brookings Institution Press, 2005); *Faith and Politics in Nigeria: Nigeria as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World* (U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2008); and *Postelection Conflict Management in Nigeria: The Challenges of National Unity*, (University of Virginia Press, 2012). Other African-related books include *The African Experience* (four volumes); *Values, Identities, and National Integration: Empirical Research in Africa*; *Black Africa: A Comparative*

*Handbook*; and *Understanding Black Africa: Data and Analysis of Social Change and Nation Building*.

Dr. Paden has worked closely with colleagues at the Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto (Nigeria), especially at the Center for Peace Studies. In 2009, he received an Honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters from Occidental College for his contributions to the development of Africa. In December 2012, he received an Honorary Doctorate from Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, for “immense contribution to the advancement of the frontiers of knowledge and scholarship.”

### **Jacob Zenn**

Jacob Zenn is an analyst of African and Eurasian affairs for The Jamestown Foundation, a legal adviser specializing in international freedom of association and civil society law, and a senior regional analyst of Courage Services, Inc. He authored *Northern Nigeria's Boko Haram: The Prize in al-Qaeda's Africa Strategy*, which was published by The Jamestown Foundation in November 2012, and conducted field research in the Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon four-border region in June 2012. He speaks Arabic, French, and Swahili.

### **Caroline Ziemke-Dickens**

Dr. Caroline F. Ziemke-Dickens is a Research Staff Member at IDA. She has a Ph.D. in Military History and Strategic Studies from The Ohio State University. She has been a key facilitator in the establishment of the Council for Asian Transnational Threat Research (CATR), a sustained “strategic listening” engagement that brings together local experts from across Asia to promote intellectual exchange and collaborative research. As part of this effort, she also is the co-editor of a monthly CATR e-journal, *Asian Conflicts Reports*. As a member of the IDA Africa Program, she tracks events in West Africa, with a special focus on the socio-political roots of Boko Haram and the prospects for the spread of global jihadist movements in Sub-Saharan Africa. Her publications include “National Myth and the Strategic Personality of Iran: A Counterproliferation Perspective,” Chapter 4 in *The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests, and World Order*, edited by Victor Utgoff (MIT Press, 2000); *Strategic Personality and the Effectiveness of Nuclear Deterrence* (IDA Document D-2537, November 2000); *Strategic Personality and the Effectiveness of Nuclear Deterrence: Deterring Iraq and Iran* (IDA Paper P-3658, September 2001); *Agents of Radicalization in the Non-Arab Muslim World* (IDA Paper P-4038, May 2005); “Reading the Elephant: Building Cooperative Approaches to Countering the Global Terrorist Threat,” in *The International Symposium on Non-Traditional Security: Challenges and Responses* (Beijing: China Institute for International Strategic Studies (CISS), June 2005); and “Perceived Oppression and Relative Deprivation: Social Factors Contributing to Terrorism,” Chapter 5 in *In the Same Light as Slavery: Building a Global Anti-Terrorist Consensus* edited by Joseph McMillan (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2007).

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