Boko Haram, a once obscure Islamist terrorist group in northern Nigeria, has quickly risen to prominence by expanding its influence across Africa’s most populous and oil-rich country. Though latent for the better part of the past decade, since 2009 the group has waged a campaign of extremist, anti-government attacks across much of northern and central Nigeria. The insurgency killed over 550 people in 2011 in 115 separate attacks. In total, at least 2,800 deaths are attributable to Boko Haram’s violent and often rudimentary tactics; however, some reports suggest the death toll is closer to 4,000. In addition to targeting Nigerian Christians, government institutions and Muslims the group accuses of cooperating with the Nigerian government, the group coordinated an attack against the United Nations’ Abuja headquarters in August 2011, which killed 23 and wounded 81. The recent collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya raised concerns about the group’s potential involvement in arms proliferation across the Sahel. The recent adoption of monikers like the “Nigerian Taliban” has led some experts to suggest that the organisation may take on the goal of a broader, international jihad. This report traces the historical evolution of Boko Haram’s development and outlines the dimensions of its conflict with the Nigerian state, including the spike in violence that began in 2009 and the response of Nigeria’s government to the extremist group. It also considers to what extent the insurgency poses a threat to the international community and reviews responses by the United States and the United Nations. Finally, the likelihood of a peace process between the militia and the Nigerian central government is considered.

Historical Evolution of Boko Haram

Boko Haram emerged from the northern Nigeria state of Borno. Some reports link the insurgency with earlier iterations of Islamist groups that opposed the Nigerian state but lacked the international notoriety of the current organisation. These accounts associate Boko Haram with small resistance groups composed of young men that began to congregate in the mid-1990s, led initially by Abubakar Lawan and later by the pseudonymous Aminu Tashen-Ilimi (“new way of knowledge”). However, a coherent group identity cannot be established until Mohammed Yusuf, a charismatic Nigerian cleric, gained prominence among local youth in Maiduguri, Borno’s capital. By 2003, Yusuf led a movement espousing a conservative theology that mimicked Saudi-style Salafism and

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opposed Nigeria’s secular state, which it considered corrupt and un-Islamic. Over time, the sect demanded more economic and political reforms. According to Peter Pham, an expert on African security issues and director of the Ansari Africa Center, these ultimatums were extreme, even in the face of a long-standing and popular movement to adopt Sharia law in the country’s northern states. Pham writes, “The introduction of Islamic law (shari’a) in the 12 northern Nigerian states since 1999 was deemed insufficient by Yusuf and his followers who argued that the country’s ruling class as a whole was moored by corruption and even Muslim northern leaders were irredeemably tainted by ‘Western-style’ ambitions”. Northern residents who feel disenfranchised often point to Abuja (the country’s capital) and Lagos (the seat of economic power), and over time the location of these cities has lent structure to the religious conflict. Both are located hundreds of miles away in what is often conceived to be “Christian territory”. Today, grievances stem from inequalities between the predominantly Muslim north and the largely Christian south, perceptions about police brutality in the north-eastern states and the state’s failure to uphold the rule of law.

Initially, Yusuf’s group secluded itself from mainstream Muslim communities in northeast Nigeria, believing the local government to be corrupt and “un-Islamic”. Its small cabinet of leaders established a mosque and farm, imposed a harsh form of sharia law and eventually developed its own police force. At the time, funding came from one of two sources: either wealthy Salafi donors Yusuf met while on hajj to Mecca (he took two such trips during his lifetime); or, from the families of Yusuf and his followers. Many in the sect’s core leadership were the sons of Borno’s wealthy merchants and local politicians.

The murder of Sheikh Ja’afar Mahmoud Adam, a popular and moderate Maiduguri cleric, and a former mentor to Yusuf, proved to be a tipping point for the organisation, demonstrating the group’s reliance on violence to solve disagreements with political-religious adversaries over its extreme, contentious interpretations of Islam. Adam sought to dissuade the group from its increasingly radical interpretations of sharia, as well as its wholesale rejection of the legitimacy of the Nigerian state. His murder in 2007 was purportedly ordered by Yusuf, after which the sect receded further into isolation while attracting converts from the neighbouring states of Kano, Bauchi, and Yobe, as well as refugees from Chad and Niger. Boko Haram incentivised poor youth to join their ranks by offering food, shelter and other forms of assistance not provided by the Nigerian government. Over time, the Nigerian media dubbed Yusuf’s Salafi group Boko Haram, a combination of Arabic and Hausa that translates into “Western education is sinful”. The group referred to itself as Yusufiya, after Yusuf, and Jama’atul Ahl Sunnah Lidda’wati wal jihad, or, “People committed to the propagation of the prophet’s teachings and jihad”. Despite some local notoriety and a few minor skirmishes, the group remained relatively docile and unnoticed by the international community until July 2009.

**July 2009 Massacre**

Hostilities erupted in the summer of 2009 that pitched Boko Haram hardliners against Nigerian security officials in a series of violent clashes that irrevocably transformed the group from a small sect of religious zealots into a radical Islamist militia capable of coordinating a country-wide insurrection.

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1 *Sharia* ("the sacred Law") typically refers to Islamic religious law. Joseph Schacht defines *sharia* as "an all-embracing body of religious duties, the totality of Allah’s commands that regulate the life of every Muslim in all its aspects". Other scholars propose a more liberal and interpretative canon of diverse religious, economic, social, political, and legal opinions that "regulate the role of Islam in the public life of the community". Most experts agree that *sharia* includes a broad spectrum of beliefs and institutions, which developed over centuries of Islamic theological study. Its evolution differed from Western legal codes in several distinct developments. Historically, *sharia* tended to be community-driven rather than organised by the state, and it is largely held to represent a dialectical process between Quranic revelations and rational thought.

2 Salafism is a sect of Sunni Islam that upholds strict, typically conservative religious beliefs. Followers seek to closely align their lives with the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed. Salafism is associated with literalist interpretations of the Quran and is most widely practiced in Saudi Arabia. It has been criticised for anti-democratic goals, restrictions on political life, and anti-western rhetoric.
The violence began when police clashed with mourners participating in a funeral procession on 11 June over the refusal of participants to wear helmets while operating motorcycles. As a result of the altercation, seventeen of Yusuf’s followers were shot by police officers. Boko Haram denounced the police brutality and vowed to avenge the deaths. As the group consolidated its munitions, state security forces also took measures to stymy an offensive throughout June and July 2009. At least one Boko Haram safe house was raided and bomb-making materials were recovered from several sites. Over several days, a series of explosions and gun battles led police to besiege sites across northern Nigeria that were occupied by the insurgency. In total, 800 lives were lost. The majority, including Mohammed Yusuf, were believed to be extremists and executed by Nigerian officials. At least 28 policemen were killed and nearly 50 buildings were destroyed, many of them schools and churches. An undisclosed number of citizens believed to be militants were executed without trial in killings Human Rights Watch (HRW) called “extra-judicial” and “illegal”.

On 26 July, militants embarked on a violent and coordinated spree across northern Nigeria. Prisoners were freed from a local jail and the homes of security officials and police officers were assaulted with guns and homemade bombs, as well as knives, clubs, sticks, and even bows and arrows. Significant casualties were sustained when Boko Haram militants attacked the Wudil police station in Kano and the Potiskum police station in Yobe.

On 27 July, police killed approximately 150 individuals, according to the Nigerian Bulletin news agency – although official tallies only recorded 32 deaths. Between 26 and 30 July, death tolls rose steadily as security forces killed hundreds of individuals believed to be Boko Haram members. Weapons were airlifted into Bauchi state and 1,000 government soldiers were deployed to Maiduguri and surrounding villages to counter insurgents. Boko Haram’s principle mosque was shelled, and on 30 July, Yusuf was found hiding in his father-in-law’s goat pen. Apparently cooperative during an interrogation that was conducted immediately after his arrest, he was executed by security forces without a trial. His 72-year-old father-in-law was reportedly killed while in police custody the following day.

Post-2009 Developments
Following the July 2009 massacre and the death of Yusuf and hundreds of other Boko Haram members, the group underwent a period of transformation. The suppression of the uprising by security forces, which included dozens of extrajudicial killings, fuelled local sentiment against the central government resulting in an increase in Boko Haram’s ranks. Yusuf’s former deputy, Abubakar Shekau, assumed leadership and organised a series of deadly attacks that expanded Boko Haram’s theatre of operations from the north-eastern states of Bauchi, Borno, Yobe, and Kano to 14 of Nigeria’s 36 states, including the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja.

The modus operandi of attacks ranges significantly. Since 2009, the group has deployed armed gunmen, suicide bombers, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) and crude, handmade weapons to wreak havoc across an increasingly large area of Nigeria. Offensives have targeted churches to exacerbate sectarian cleavages between Christians and Muslims, and also government, security, and financial institutions to undermine the current political regime. Attacks are often symbolic in nature. For instance, in December 2012, Boko Haram succeeded in carrying out its third consecutive Christmas assault when gunmen shot and killed six churchgoers in Maiduguri and Peri. Forty-three individuals were killed on Christmas in 2011 when 6 bombs were set off across the country, including one at St. Theresa’s Catholic Church in Abu-
ja that took the lives of 37 worshipers. In 2010, eighty people died as a result of bombs detonated on Christmas Eve in Jos. In addition to strikes against Christian targets, the group continues a campaign against moderate Muslims that it deems “insufficiently Islamic,” often attacking holy sites during important Islamic holidays. Furthermore, Nigerian Christians have levied attacks against northern Muslims in retaliation for Boko Haram violence, contributing another element to the escalating violence in the region.

The 2011 VBIED attack on the UN headquarters in Abuja, which killed 23 and wounded more than 80, presents the greatest aberration to Boko Haram’s strategy as it is the first – and, to date, only – instance where the group specifically launched an attack on an international target. Immediate responses called for sweeping changes to Nigerian counter-terrorism policy and for organisations in the country to reconsider their security programmes. According to the Heritage Foundation, “Bombing the headquarters of an international organisation is a wake-up call to the Nigerian government and the international community”. Abu Dardaa, a Boko Haram leader in Lagina, further stoked fears of worldwide attacks when he issued a statement following the suicide bombing that boasted, “More attacks are on the way…We will have unfettered access to wherever we want to attack”.

The sophistication of the VBIED also led to immediate concerns about collusion with other international terrorist cells, particularly Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Somalia’s al Shabaab. Dr. J. Peter Pham, director of the Atlantic Council’s Africa Center, suggests the cross-fertilisation of ideas and experiences between Islamist sects across the African continent might fuel the radicalisation of each group. Until recently, strikes had not been carried out against international targets since the UN bombing. However, Boko Haram launched an attack outside of Nigeria when it supported the 2012 coup in Mali; at least 100 members of the group were among the men who laid siege to the Algerian consulate in Gao. US military commanders have repeatedly warned about coordination between jihadist groups in the Sahel, encouraging security assistance and cooperation with governments that struggle with domestic Islamic militancy. To that end, the Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) is an interagency civil-military programme that began in 2005 and continues to deliver counterterrorism training and assistance to Sahel states that combat transnational criminal organisations. Despite the calls for vigilance against affiliations between Boko Haram and other terrorist groups on the continent, experts like Peter Bergen of the New America Foundation remain sceptical that the group will link with other cells and target western interests, instead emphasising the domestic goals of the group and its minimal international footprint.

The on-going violence demonstrates several truths about the insurgency. First, Nigerian security officials failed to quash the group, despite killing Yusuf and destroying the Maiduguri mosque in 2009, which until that time had served as the centre of the sect’s symbolic and religious identity. Second, there exists continued reliance on terrorist tactics to achieve organisational goals, particularly of establishing sharia law in Nigeria and ousting the current political regime. Additionally, Boko Haram has increasingly attacked Christian citizens rather than limiting their offensives to government facilities and personnel. In particular, churches and schools have been targeted, deepening sectarian tensions across the country. Finally, International Crisis Group asserts the continued violence reveals a new grievance that has played out since the July 2009 attacks: extrajudicial killings of Muslim citizens in the north are illegal and must be redressed in order to stem the flow of recruits to Boko Haram’s cause.

Nigerian Responses
The terrorist tactics undertaken by Boko Haram succeeded in undermining the authority of political leaders and the Nigerian security apparatus, goals that the group has continually cited since 2009. The violent campaign has increased fears and insecurity across the entire country, leading President Goodluck Jonathan to declare a state of emergency in December 2011. Six months later, in June 2012, the President dismissed his minister of defence and senior security advisor after nearly 150 people were killed in a single week. Indeed, former Nigerian President Olusegun has levied harsh criticism against Jonathan for his handling of the insurgency. Most recently, he excoriated the president in a December 2012 interview, saying, “When you have a sore and fail to attend to it quickly, it festers and grows to become something else”. Olusegun may seek election again in 2015 as a result of public backlash against Jonathan’s weakness in the face of Boko Haram’s increasing power. Violence has flared despite the fact that twenty per cent of the country’s total budget was allocated to security in 2012.
The Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria

Tactical Responses
The Joint Military Task Force (JTF) was created in July 2011 and installed in Borno state. It consists of military, police, and the State Security Service (SSS), and is charged with restoring civil order in the North. As soon as the troops deployed, human rights groups began criticising their tactics. Amnesty International has voiced particular concern. A recent analysis found numerous “investigative” activities carried out by the JTF to be unlawful. According to a December 2011 Amnesty International report, “Investigations do not seem to be intelligence-led; the Joint Military Task Force (JTF) simply cordon off areas and carry out house to house searches, arresting and at times shooting young men”. The document goes on to cite destruction of property, extrajudicial executions, and public assaults against women and children as regular tactics illegally undertaken by JTF forces. Accounts in the Nigerian media support these claims. International news outlets also document point-blank executions carried out in the presence of senior officers in Nigeria’s army. However, JTF spokesperson, Lieutenant Ikedichi Iweha, denied the allegations, saying “We have been conducting our work with utmost professionalism, and we will continue to do so”.

Systemic Problems
Analysts at Amnesty International have pointed out two critical policy errors made by the Nigerian government. First, its brutal suppression of the group, which includes a number of extrajudicial executions, clearly abandons the rule of law and has led to a backlash in the North. Many Muslims complain of marginalisation by the federal government, which is dominated by Christians. Additionally, at both local and federal levels, the Nigerian government has failed to respond satisfactorily to underlying social and economic conditions in the northern states. Poverty and malnutrition rates are staggering – over 75 per cent of residents in the north are impoverished, living off of less than USD one per day. According to Professor Paul Lubeck, an expert on the insurgency, the combined factors of government dissatisfaction over poverty and local perceptions of injustice fuel grassroots support for militants. As Lubeck told Al Jazeera, “The emergence of Boko Haram arises directly from the brutal suppression of an insurrection in Maiduguri and the murder of three of the leaders of the sect... This is a Salafist Islamic insurrection against Jonathan, but also against the political elite governing northern Nigeria, which is fragmented and has not delivered healthcare, education, living standards, water, or economic and social security”.

International Responses

United States
In November 2011, a US congressional report released by the Committee on Homeland Security’s Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence found that Boko Haram poses an emerging threat to the United States. It cited the VBIED attack on the UN compound in Abuja as the first instance of violence carried out by the group against international targets and suggested that similar attacks against “Western interests” were likely. According to the report, “The attack marked a significant shift in the targeting and goals of the group…and capped off an evolution in the capabilities in Boko Haram, beginning in the mid-2000s, from attacks with poisoned arrows and machetes to sophisticated bombings”.

To substantiate its claim that Boko Haram might expand its campaign of violence and strike US territory, the report compared the group’s activities with a previous failure of US counterterrorism efforts that overlooked the emergence of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP). Both of these organisations evolved from regional menaces into international terrorist groups. As the hearing report states, “[g]iven the ability of these groups to become operational with apparently meagre 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”. The findings echoed assertions about the group made by former US Ambassador to Nigeria John Campbell who asserts that the security challenge in Nigeria has become “internationalized”. In March 2012, congressional leaders called for the group to be designated a foreign terrorist organisation (FTO).

3 NOTE: This source links to a graphic video that shows the execution of unarmed civilians. The content is extremely violent.
4 NOTE: This source links to a graphic video. The content is extremely violent.
In December 2012, President Jonathan met with US Africa Command (AFRICOM) General Carter Ham and requested security sector assistance to bolster Nigeria’s counterterrorism efforts targeting Boko Haram. The general agreed to collaborate with Jonathan in the form of police reinforcements along the border with Cameroon to restrict the illegal importation of explosives and munitions. During the meeting, Ham described a trend of support from international terrorist cells. “What is particularly worrisome to me is the increasing linkage between various elements of the network, which significantly increases the ability of violent extremist organizations to threaten regional security and broader African and U.S. security interests,” stated Ham. On 24 December 2012, the US Department of Defense announced plans to dispatch small military teams in 2013 to Nigeria in response to the Boko Haram threat. The troops were not sent to conduct operations, but to train and equip Nigerian military officials, according to the Associated Press (AP).

**United Nations**

As a whole, the UN system has taken precautions to mitigate the risk of future Boko Haram violence in the wake of the Abuja attack. When it occurred in August 2011, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon immediately condemned the bombing and dispatched security experts to the country, including Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro. In November 2011, Ban established a mission to examine the threat of arms proliferation following the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya. The mission submitted its report to the Secretary-General, suggesting that arms could be hidden at sites throughout the vast Sahel region and then sold to terrorist groups like Boko Haram. Like the congressional findings, the Security Council report explicitly states that Boko Haram is linked to Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). “The mission representatives were informed that Boko Haram had established links with Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and that some of its members from Nigeria and Chad had received training in the Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb camps in Mali during the summer of 2011.” This account seems to corroborate fears voiced by US leaders that the insurgency will seek assistance from international terrorist groups, perhaps expanding its operations outside of Nigeria. The mission also underlined the regional problems posed by the Nigerian militants when it stated, “Whereas Nigerian authorities viewed the group as a national threat without any links to Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, it has become a growing source of concern for the countries of the region.”

In January 2012, Ban reiterated the need for coordination efforts between member states and international organisations to implement counterterrorism measures in the country. Likewise, Nigeria’s Ambassador Abdulahi Omaki urged the UN to increase security sector assistance partnerships, citing the “external influence” of international terrorists. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) warned that Boko Haram’s targeting of Christian civilians amounts to crimes against humanity and implied the group’s leaders could be charged accordingly. Most recently, a report leaked in November 2012 revealed that Fatou Bensouda, Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), alleges the group to have committed systematic crimes against humanity. To date no formal charges have been brought against the organisation, although the ICC maintains an on-going “preliminary examination” into Boko Haram.

**Peace Process**

In January 2012, President Jonathan’s national security advisor announced that the Nigerian government initiated peace talks with representatives of the group through political “back channels”. Two months later, Datti Ahmad, the chief mediator, announced that he was abdicating his role, and talks came to an end. In November 2012, a spokesperson for Boko Haram, Abu Mohammed Ibn Abdulaziz, extended an offer for peace talks during a phone interview with journalists in Maiduguri. Abdulaziz provided five conditions for the talks: negotiations must be held in Saudi Arabia; Muhammadu Buhari, Nigeria’s military ruler (1984-85) must arbitrate discussions; Ali Modu Sheriff, the former governor of Borno responsible for the fatal enforcement of the motorcycle helmet law in 2009 must be arrested; members of Boko Haram must receive compensation for the death of family members and facilities, including mosques, destroyed by the state must be restored; finally, jailed sect members must be released.

According to AP, Abdulaziz did not mention the application of sharia across Nigeria, which the insurgency has commonly required in previous statements. Elaborating on the sect’s goals, he said, “We are not actually challenging the state, as people are saying, but the security (forces) who are killing our members, children and wives…We want to [engage in] dialogue but government must show sincerity in its handling of the situation”. In response to
the purported offering, President Jonathan stated, “If what the proposed ceasefire is intended to achieve are the objectives of peace and security, then it is a welcome development”.

Many experts remain sceptical, as violence continued in the two months following the announcement. Fifteen people were slaughtered on 29 December 2012, and gunmen believed to be Boko Haram militants killed six Christians on Christmas Eve. One month later, on 23 January 2013, gunmen killed between 18 and 23 civilians in the town of Dumboa. Although Boko Haram did not immediately take credit for the attack, a local official named Alhaji Abba Ahmed accused the terrorist group of coordinating the assault. Less than 24 hours later, a series of bombs detonated in Maiduguri. JTF troops engaged the attackers and a multi-hour gun battle ensued. A local official in the Ministry of Animal Resources and Fisheries was believed to be a target and was one of twelve people killed in the attack.

In addition to on-going violence, there is confusion about the group’s organisation and whether Abdulaziz even speaks for Shekau and the sect’s leadership. He claims to have replaced the group’s previous spokesperson, Abu Qaqa, who was killed by security forces in September 2012. Finally, Buhari rejected the offer to serve as mediator, seeking to distance himself from the group’s Islamic radicalism, and casting serious doubts on whether a peace process is possible.

Conclusion
In less than a decade, Boko Haram’s militancy evolved from an obscure Islamist group in north-eastern Nigeria to a violent terrorist organisation capable of disrupting Nigerian state security and executing sophisticated attack against an international target. Since 2009, as many as 4,000 militants and civilians have been killed. Many experts argue the group poses new threats to regional and international interests. Despite these claims, the centralisation of the cell’s structure remains in question, and its intention to strike external sites is not certain. A peace process could be possible, although it will require substantial political will. An alternative is the continued reliance on a heavy security presence in the region, now supported by the United States. However, this has led to human rights abuses in the past and ignores a call for justice by Boko Haram leaders. To reach an agreement, the insurgency must renounce violence and abandon its call for sharia law, as recently hinted by Abdulaziz. Amnesty International recommends the Nigerian government should in turn agree to the cessation of extrajudicial killings, and then uphold this promise. The issue is a core grievance that actually legitimises the militants in the eyes of many locals. Currently, Boko Haram also calls for the release of its jailed members. Amnesty for prisoners is not a request that Jonathan’s government is likely to consider seriously. Finally, US Assistant Secretary of State Johnnie Carson, says that federal and local government must offer solutions to northern Nigeria’s most economically disadvantaged populations. Current social and economic conditions fuel the insurgency. This challenge is not slight, and requires coordination among all parties in a region that is rife with sectarianism and has been plagued by years of sporadic violence.