

Statement for the Record

House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence November 30, 2011

**Ricardo René Larémont
Professor of Political Science and Sociology, SUNY Binghamton**

“Boko Haram, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Al Shabab”

Chairman Meehan, Ranking Member Speier, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss my views concerning Boko Haram, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Al Shabab.

NATO’s prosecution of a combined counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaign in Pakistan and Afghanistan has decimated the ranks of what has been known as Al Qaida Central and has caused its remnants (hereinafter AQ) to seek safe havens elsewhere, notably in Yemen, the Horn of Africa, North Africa, and the Sahel. AQ has an established pattern of attempting to create safe havens for operations in regions of the world where governmental presence is minimal. While America and NATO have “surged” in Afghanistan and Pakistan, AQ has also “surged” in the regions mentioned above. One of our tasks today is to assess both the evidence and the potential threat of collaboration among Boko Haram, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Al Shabab.

Boko Haram, which was founded in 2002, is an Islamist religious sect operating primarily in the northeastern Nigerian states of Borno and Yobe. Boko Haram opposes the government of Nigeria because it claims that the government is secular and corrupt. Boko Haram endeavors to create an Islamic state in Nigeria that it claims would render justice and provide transparency in government in Nigeria. It is seeking to establish an Islamic state even though Nigeria is a bi-religious society with approximately 55% of the population being Muslim with the remainder being Christians or practitioners of African traditional religions. Since 2009 Boko Haram has attacked police and army officers, politicians, clerics, and ordinary citizens, primarily in northern Nigeria. Its attacks have mostly involved assailants who use mopeds in “drive-by” attacks employing handguns, rifles, or small explosives. Beginning on June 16, 2011, however, Boko Haram changed its choice of targets by striking beyond northern Nigeria for the first time. It struck Police Headquarters in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, destroying 40 vehicles in the Police Headquarters parking lot. It also changed tactics by moving from “drive-by shootings” to detonating an improvised explosive device (IED). The use of an IED in this attack involved a level of sophistication regarding bomb construction that arguably was obtained elsewhere, most likely from resources within the Al Qaeda network. On August 26, 2011 Boko Haram undertook a second IED attack in Abuja, this time using a suicide bomber who drove an explosives laden truck into the headquarters for the United Nations,

killing 18 persons in that attack.¹ Since the attack on the United Nations headquarters, Nigeria's State Security Service has disclosed it has information that Boko Haram intends to target up-scale hotels in Abuja, notably the Hilton, the Sheraton, and the Nikon Luxury.² This shift in tactics and location of attacks changes the nature of Boko Haram's threat with Western interests now being targeted. Also of interest for the security community has been an alleged attempt to link the operations of Boko Haram with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which is a larger, more effective, and more lethal Islamist jihadist group presently operating in Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is an Islamist jihadist group that originally was formed to depose the government of Algeria but it has become a transnational group operating in Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, and now – because of possible linkages with Boko Haram – Nigeria.³ While AQIM in northern Algeria primarily focuses upon attacking police and military officials in a region that extends from the capital Algiers and then moves towards the east into the Kabylie mountains, AQIM in the Sahel is an organization that hopes to play a greater and clearly destabilizing role in that region. AQIM's aspirations for expanded range of operations and tactical effectiveness may increase in the near future because of the security vacuum that has been generated by the fall of Muammar al-Qaddafi's regime in Libya, which was a regime that was firmly opposed to Islamist jihadism in the Sahel.

When security analysts examine the possibility for instability in the Sahel they cannot assess Boko Haram, AQIM, and Al Shabab in isolation. The Sahel – which stretches from Mauritania to Somalia and from southern Algeria to northern Nigeria – must be understood as a continuum. The Sahel is either desert or savannah and its residents – from pastoralists to manual workers – largely disregard the borders of the countries that comprise it. Similarly, violent jihadists of various schools – from Boko Haram to AQIM and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and the Moroccan Islamic Fighting Group – also understand this region as a united continuum upon which they plan their future operations.

In the wake of the fall of the Qaddafi's regime in Libya, it is rather clear that AQIM and its potential allies of Boko Haram and Al Shabab aspire to expand their operations. Muammar Qaddafi opposed Islamist jihadist groups in the region and he used either money (by funding social, education, or construction programs) or arms (using his security forces) to inhibit their operations. With Qaddafi gone and a security vacuum being created, AQIM and its allies find themselves in a situation within which they plan to expand. We must obviously concede that there will be gaps between AQIM's and Boko Haram's aspirations for expansion and their accomplishment of these objectives.

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/aug/26/nigeria-attack-islamists-claim-responsibility>, accessed 23 November 2011.

² <http://www.nigeriadailynews.com/general/30688-luxury-hotels-in-abuja-deserted-over-threat-of-attack-by-boko-haram.html>, accessed 23 November 2011.

³ For more on AQIM, see Ricardo René Larémont, "Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism and Counterterrorism in the Sahel," *African Security*. Vol. 4 (2011): 242-268 and Steven Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an African Islamist terrorist group into an Al-Qa'ida Affiliate and its implications for the Sahara-Sahel region," <http://concernedafricascholars.org/docs/bulletin85harmon.pdf>, accessed 23 November 2011.

Nevertheless, there is evidence being obtained from various sources – including open source materials, newspaper accounts, and interviews with officials in the Sahel – that lead us to conclude that AQIM in particular hopes to seize upon the chaos created by the fall of Qaddafi to advance their regional objectives. In Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, and Niger AQIM intends to expand their already existing links with local Tuareg tribes who have episodically opposed central governments in the region. Also, in these same countries discussions have already taken place to establish better working relationships between AQIM and former Malian and Nigerien Tuareg soldiers who had been in the employ of Qaddafi's now disbanded African Legion. That Legion employed approximately 1,000 soldiers who fought for Qaddafi. These soldiers have seized high-quality armaments in Libya, including anti-aircraft artillery, SA-7 surface-to-air missiles, and other armaments.⁴

Besides expanding their operations in Algeria, Mali, and Niger, AQIM will also attempt to relink with members or former members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), some of whom are participating in the formation of Libya's new government. Among LIFG members playing prominent roles in Libya's National Transitional Council include Abd al-Hakim Belhaj (the commander of Tripoli's Military Council) and Abdel-Hakim al-Hasidi.⁵ Belhaj has publicly alleged being tortured by the CIA in Bangkok and he has also acknowledged past ties to Al Qaeda and to his having met Osama bin Laden. He now claims to have modified his political views and he has declared his desire to create a pluralist and inclusive political structure in Libya that will be tolerant of diverse points of view.⁶

Moving beyond Algeria, Mali, Niger, and Libya, we will see that AQIM will attempt to link with and assist Boko Haram in Nigeria. Indeed, AQIM's leader, Abu Musab Abd Al-

⁴ Daya Gamage, "Libyan Rebel Commander Admits Link to al-Qaeda: Chad President says al-Qaeda Acquired Weapons in Rebel Zone," www.asiantribune.com/news/2011/03/28/libyan-rebel-commander-admits-link-al-qaeda-chad-president-says-al-qaeda-acquired-we, accessed March 30, 2011; Felipe Pathé Duarte, "Maghrebian Militant Maneuvers: AQIM as a Strategic Challenge," <http://csis.org/publication/maghrebian-militant-maneuvers-aqim-strategic-challenge>, accessed 23 November 2011.

⁵ Praveen Swami, Nick Squires and Duncan Gardham, "Libyan rebel commander admits his fighters have al-Qaeda links," *The Telegraph*, 23 November 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8407047/Libyan-rebel-commander-admits-his-fighters-have-al-Qaeda-links.html>, accessed 23 November 2011; Omar Ashour, "Ex-Jihadists in the New Libya," *Foreign Policy*, 29 August 2011, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/08/29/post_qaddafi_libya_islamists_arms_and_democracy_0, accessed 23 November 2011; Souad Mekhennet and Eric Schmidt, "Exiled Islamists Watch Rebellion Unfold at Home," *The New York Times*, 18 July 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/19/world/africa/19rebel.html>, accessed 23 November 2011.

⁶ Abdel Hakim Belhaj, "The revolution belongs to all Libyans, secular or not," *The Guardian*, 26 September 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/sep/27/revolution-belongs-to-all-libyans>, accessed 23 November 2011; Hadeel Al-Shalchi and Maggie Michael, "Abdel Hakim Belhaj, Libya Rebel Commander, Plays Down Islamist Past," *The Huffington Post*, 23 November 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/02/abdel-hakim-belhaj_n_946518.html, accessed 23 November 2011; David Poort, "Q&A: Top NTC commander Abdel Hakim Belhadj," <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/11/20111117102116501736.html>, accessed 23 November 2011;

Wadoud told Al Jazeera that his group would provide Boko Haram with support.⁷ The Nigerian and the Algerian governments are right now investigating now to see whether a Boko Haram-AQIM link exists.⁸ While the evidence at this moment in time is weak and inconclusive, we should remain vigilant because a viable connection between AQIM and Boko Haram makes sense from AQIM's and Boko Haram's strategic perspectives.

If AQIM were to link successfully with Boko Haram in Nigeria, this development would not only affect Nigeria; such a development would arguably have destabilizing effects throughout West Africa. Nigeria is the pivotal state in West Africa. When it becomes weaker or unstable, the entire West African region is affected. That is why this issue of Boko Haram and AQIM that we are examining in this hearing needs to be dealt with now while it is in its earliest stages, before what presently seems a weak and inconclusive link becomes more real and dangerous. It would seem that a thoroughgoing security analysis of the political, social, and economic factors that make northern Nigeria particularly susceptible to targeting by jihadist groups would be in order. It would seem that an investment in the acquisition of relevant data for security analysis now would enhance the security of the United States and would cost less than waiting until these trends worsen (as they did previously in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen).

This needed security analysis would lead us to understand why northern Nigeria in particular has become fertile ground for Islamist jihadist recruiters. Nigeria is a diverse country with its residents' religious affiliations being arranged over a Muslim-Christian divide. That is one reason for tension between the religions. Furthermore, wide differences in wealth exist between an essentially destitute northern region and a somewhat more prosperous south. (The south substantially obtains most of its income from petroleum exploration and sales.) Given the extraordinary levels of poverty in the north and its widespread rates of illiteracy, we can understand why dissidents within the north often choose to affiliate with Islamist movements that claim that they will improve the living standards of the poor by establishing a more just and transparent government that would be ruled by Islamic law. According to some analyses no more than 40 percent of males in northern Nigeria are literate while female literacy hovers around 20 percent. These figures contrast with Nigeria's south where the literacy rate for males is approximately 74 percent while the rate for women is between 55 to 60 percent. Professor Ibrahim Gambari, Special Advisor to the United Nations Secretary General,

⁷ STRATFOR, "The Rising Threat from Nigeria's Boko Haram Militant Group, 10 November 2011, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20111109-rising-threat-nigerias-boko-haram-militant-group>, accessed 24 November 2011.

⁸ Paul Cruickshank and Tim Lister, "Al Qaeda-linked group finds fertile territory in Nigeria as killings escalate," <http://www.cnn.com/2011/11/18/world/africa/nigeria-militants/index.html>, accessed 23 November 2011; Karen Leigh, "Nigeria's Boko Haram: Al-Qaeda's New Friend in Africa?" *Time Magazine*, 31 August 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2091137,00.html>, accessed 23 November 2011; Robyn Dixon, "Nigeria militant group Boko Haram's attacks attract speculation," *The Los Angeles Times*, 13 September 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/sep/13/world/la-fg-nigeria-boko-haram-20110914>, accessed 23 November 2011; Lamine Chikhi, "Algeria says Nigeria's Boko Haram tied to al Qaeda," Reuters, <http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFJJOE7AD01H20111114>, accessed 24 November 2011.

recently disclosed vast disparities regarding the education of girls in Nigeria. He said that while 85 percent of girls were being educated in the southeastern and southwestern regions of the country, school enrollment rates for girls in the northeast were 20 percent while in the northwest they were 25 percent.⁹ Jobs simply cannot be created with such high levels of illiteracy and under-enrollment of children in schools. Going forward with our security analysis we will need to recognize that northern Nigeria's poverty is extreme and structural and that this impediment will have to be addressed if we are to deal with the security threat being created by Boko Haram and its possible alliance with its larger and more effective affiliate AQIM. A comprehensive security analysis of both Nigeria and the Sahelian region is in order because it is both clear and predictable that it is within the Sahel and also the Horn of Africa and the Arabian peninsula that Al Qaeda and its affiliates hope to expand their operations.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee.

⁹ Emma Ujah & Luka Binniyat, "Northern Nigeria Has World Highest Illiterate- World Bank, www.thenigerianvoice.com/nvnews/53569/1/northern-nigeria-has-world-highest-illiterate-worl.html, accessed 24 November 2011.