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Prepared Statement of

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on

"Boko Haram – Emerging Threat to the U.S. Homeland"

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Speier, Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

I would like to thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today on the extremist militant sect Boko Haram, examining not only the threat that it currently poses to Nigeria, but also its potential impact on the West African subregion and the international community at large, especially the United States.

The Emergence of Boko Haram

While Boko Haram first received widespread attention for the armed attacks it launched against police stations and other public buildings in the towns of Geidam and Kanamma in Nigeria's northeastern Yobe State on Christmas Eve 2003, the emergence of the militant sect cannot be understood without reference to the social, religious, economic, and political milieu of northern Nigeria.

Nigerian sources differ in their accounts of the precise origins of the group, but most agree on the parallels with—if not direct connection in terms of individuals linked to—the Maitatsine[1] uprisings of the early 1980s which left thousands dead and a cut a path of destruction across five northern Nigerian states. Certainly there are comparisons to be drawn between Boko Haram and the earlier movement in terms of ideology, objectives, and modus operandi. Both the Yan Tatsine and Boko Haram can be described fanatical sects whose beliefs are distinguishable from the religious orthodoxy of the majority of Nigerian Muslims. Both, in their rejection of Western civilization, eventually also came to reject the legitimacy of the secular Nigerian state, invariably described as *dagut* ("evil") and unworthy of allegiance, and ended up waging war against it in an effort to bring it down, to be replaced by a "purified" Islamic regime. In both cases, police were unable to quell the outbreak of violence and military forces had to be deployed. And while there is nearly a three-decade gap between the Yan Tatsine and Boko Haram, that passage of time has only seen the worsening of socioeconomic conditions of northern Nigeria with respect to economic stagnation, lack of educational, corruption, and political marginalization—all of which serves to swell the ranks of the ignorant, destitute, and disillusioned who are easy recruits for movements promising a radical transformation of Nigerian society.

[1] The Maitatsine movement took its name from a religious preacher, Muhammadu Marwa, who moved from his native Cameroon to northern Nigeria around 1945. His polemical sermons, ostensibly based on the Quran and aimed at both religious and political authorities, earned Marwa the sobriquet by which he was generally known, "Maitatsine" (in the Hausa *lingua franca* of northern Nigeria, "he who curses"), as well as the ire of the British colonial authorities who had him deported. Maitatsine eventually returned to Nigeria sometime after its independence and, by the early 1970s, had gathered a large and increasingly militant following, the "Yan Tatsine" ("followers of Maitatsine"), drawing heavily from youth, unemployed migrants, and others who felt that the official Islamic hierarchy was unresponsive to their needs. Maitatsine proclaimed himself a prophet and became increasingly anti-government in his pronouncements. He was killed by security forces during a December 1980 insurrection in Kano, but his followers rose up again in 1982, 1984, and 1985. See J. Peter Pham, "In Nigeria False Prophets are Real Problems," *World Defense Review*, October 19, 2006, http://worlddefensereview.com/pham101906.shtml.

The name *Boko Haram* is itself derived from the combination of the Hausa word for "book" (as in "book learning"), *boko*, and the Arabic term *haram*, which designates those things which are religiously forbidden as ungodly or sinful. Thus "Boko Haram" is not only a proper name, but also a slogan to the effect that "Western education (and such product that arises from it) is sacrilege." More recently, the group's spokesmen have adopted the Arabic name *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* ("group committed to the teachings [of the Prophet], preaching, and jihad").

After its late 2003 attacks were repelled, Boko Haram followers regrouped at a base on the border with Niger which they dubbed "Afghanistan" where, in 2004, they were joined by students from various local universities who withdrew from school and joined the sect for Quranic instructions. Later that year, Boko Haram members attacked police stations in Borno State, killing several policemen and stealing arms and ammunition. The police counterattacked the group and killed two dozen members. This set pattern for the next few years with Boko Haram members carrying out occasional assaults on police, who responded with raids and arrests.

One of these isolated skirmishes, a security raid on a Boko Haram hideout in Bauchi State in late July 2009, however, led to reprisal attacks on police and subsequently five days of rioting which spread across Bauchi, Kano, Yobe, and Borno. The violence was finally petered out after Boko Haram's leader, Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf was captured and killed—supposedly while attempting to escape—but not before more than 700 people were killed and numerous public buildings, including government offices, police stations, schools, and churches were destroyed.

With its leaders as well as several prominent financial backers, including Alhaji Buji Foi, a former commissioner for religious affairs in the state government of Borno, dead, the group receded from public attention and a number of analysts argued that it was either finished or hopelessly fractured.

Boko Haram since 2010

Far from being dead, however, the group had undergone a dramatic transformation. In retrospect, the first sign of this was a June 14, 2010, al-Jazeera interview given by Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, a.k.a. Abdelmalek Droukdel, the emir of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The head of al-Qaeda's North African franchise stated that his group would provide Boko Haram with weapons, training, and other support in order to expand its own reach into Sub-Saharan Africa. At the time, this claim was widely dismissed, both because Droukdel was known for outsized ambitions and because he was having internal difficulties at that time with the more dynamic southern commanders within his own group.[2]

[2] See ibid, "Foreign Influences and Shifting Horizons: The Ongoing Evolution of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 240-254.

Shortly afterward, Mohammed Yusuf's former deputy, Abubakar bin Muhammad Shekau, who was thought to have been killed in the suppression of the previous year's uprising, surfaced in a video that might best be described as "classic al-Qaeda." Wearing a headdress and framed by an AK-47 and a stack of religious books, Shekau proclaimed himself the new head of Boko Haram and promised vengeance for the casualties suffered the year before. Significantly, he threatened attacks not only against the Nigerian state, but also against "outposts of Western culture" in the country. The following month, Shekau published a manifesto in which he linked the jihad being fought by Boko Haram in Nigeria with the jihadist efforts globally, especially that of "the soldiers of Allah in the Islamic State of Iraq."

Two months later, on September 7, 2010, Boko Haram fighters dramatically broke into a federal prison in Bauchi and freed more than one hundred of their fellow members who had been detained there awaiting trial since the previous year's uprising. In the process of the assault, involving bombs and automatic weapons, the militants also let out more than 750 other prisoners and scattered leaflets warning of further violence.

The latter was not long delayed. On Christmas Eve 2010, the group set off a string of seven improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Jos, Plateau State. The bombings, which targeted the town's Christian communities, left 32 people dead and scores of others wounded. While the group subsequently carried out a number of other attacks—mainly small IEDs thrown from moving vehicles or planted near the target, although there was also the occasional prison break—it was only at the middle of this year when it achieved what should be considered a very significant and ominous tactical and operational upgrade in its capabilities.

On June 16, 2011, Boko Haram launched its first suicide attack using a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED). The attack, believed to also be the first suicide attack to take place in Nigeria, targeted the Inspector-General of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF), whose convoy the terrorist followed into the Louise Edet House headquarters compound of the NPF in the federal capital of Abuja. While the target escaped harm because security detained the suspect vehicle, the explosion was large enough to nonetheless destroy several dozen police vehicles parked nearby. In fact, the incident showed that far from being a spent force, Boko Haram had adopted and, indeed, mastered one of the deadliest instruments in the jihadist arsenal. Moreover, it also demonstrated that the militant group was now capable of carrying out operations far from its usual areas of operation.

Two months later, on August 26—after having spent the interim carrying out a half dozen smaller attacks on government officials, establishments that served alcohol, and churches—Boko Haram carried out another major attack, sending another suicide bomber with an explosive-laden car to the offices of the United Nations in Abuja. Twenty-one people were killed and at least seventy were wounded in what UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon characterized as an "assault on those who devote themselves to helping others." This attack, the first by the

group against a transnational target, put it in the ranks with jihadist terrorists who have targeted UN agencies in places Afghanistan, Iraq, and Algeria.

Earlier this month, on November 5, the U.S. Embassy in Nigeria issued a warning, indicating that it had received intelligence that Boko Haram was planning bomb attacks against several targets in the Nigerian capital in conjunction with the Muslim feast of sacrifice, Eid al-Adha. The warning specifically singled out as possible targets were the Hilton, Nicon Luxury, and Sheraton hotels. While the holiday passed without any terrorist incidents in Abuja, Boko Haram did strike at multiple targets in three northern cities, including a security tribunal in Damaturu and a military base in Maiduguri, killing more than 100 people in the process. Two of the attacks reportedly involved VBIEDs.

Just this past weekend, Boko Haram militants armed with automatic weapons and explosives attacked several targets in Yobe State, including a police station and a bank in Geidam, the same town where the group first burst upon the scene with its Christmas Eve assaults eight years ago.

External Links

While one should be cautious about asserting connections between different terrorist organizations and other militant groups in the absence of credible evidence, one should also be wary of biases introduced into the threat analysis by arbitrary distinctions and classifications which do little justice to more fluid realities. A good case in point is the Sahel, the belt connecting North Africa and West Africa and straddling ancient trade and migration routes from Mauritania on the Atlantic Ocean to Somalia on the Indian Ocean. The region is strategically important for several reasons, including its role as a bridge between the Arab (and Berber) Maghreb and black Sub-Saharan Africa as well as its important natural resources, both renewable and nonrenewable. Moreover, the Sahel belt touches several countries—including Algeria, Nigeria, and Sudan—with serious security challenges of their own that could easily spill over their borders. In fact, a number of scholars have argued that the Sahara and the Sahel form "a single space of movement" which, for purposes of the geography of terrorism, "should be considered as a continuum, something that the territorial approach of states and geopolitics prevents us from understanding."[3]

That being said, there are some tantalizing linkages between Boko Haram and other militant movements. The former has clearly absorbed what many regard as the a signature tactic of some of the latter, the use of VBIEDs in repeated attacks against high-profile public targets, resulting if not in a significant increase in the number of operations, certainly a potentially spectacular increase in the casualties resulting from each, especially in cases where the bombs

[3] Olivier Walther and Denis Retaille, "Sahara or Sahel? The Fuzzy Geography of Terrorism in West Africa" (working paper, CEPS/INSTEAD, Luxembourg, November 2010), 11.

are deployed in near-simultaneous or otherwise coordinated attacks. At the very least, the existence at all of suicide attacks indicates a level of foreign ideological influence since they practically unknown in Africa, even during the height of the Algerian civil war which left hundreds of thousands dead or wounded, until more recent years when they were legitimized by ideologues close to al-Qaeda and became increasingly commonplace in AQIM's repertoire.

AQIM itself has had a discrete number of Nigerian recruits since Algerian *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC, "Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat") was rebranded as al-Qaeda's franchise in the region, a fact acknowledged as Abdelmalek Droukdel acknowledged as far back as 2008 when he gave an extensive interview to the *New York Times*. And the group has never hidden its ambition to bring in the Islamists of Nigeria in particular, exploiting the sectarian strife and conflict between Muslims and Christians in the West African nation. Nor, given the operational pragmatism it has evinced in recent years, would AQIM necessarily be put off by the more questionably orthodox aspects of the lives or beliefs of its potential Nigerian partners.[4]

It is noteworthy, in fact, that both AQIM and Boko Haram leaders have issued statements complimenting each other and pledging mutual support. Tellingly, AQIM has permitted the Nigerian group's Abubakar Shekau to employ its media operation, al-Andalus, to spread messages.

Furthermore, there is the question of the role currently being played within the movement by the Chadian-born Mamman Nur, formerly third highest-ranking figure in Boko Haram's leadership after Mohammed Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau. After Boko Haram members dispersed in the aftermath of the government crackdown in 2009, Nur is believed to have gone to Somalia, where he and his followers trained in camps within territory controlled by the insurgents of the *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen* ("Movement of Warrior Youth," al-Shabaab) and forged links with transnational jihadist networks. He returned to Nigeria earlier this year and is alleged by Nigerian authorities, who placed a 25 million naira ($175,000) bounty on his head, to have masterminded the attack on the UN building in Abuja in August.

One should also keep in mind that the successful establishment or acquisition of an active affiliate in Sub-Saharan Africa has been a goal of al-Qaeda for some time.[5] In June 2006, for example, *Sada al-Jihad* ("Echo of Jihad"), the magazine of what was then al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia—which later evolved into al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—published a lengthy article by one Abu Azzam al-Ansari entitled "Al-Qaeda is moving to Africa." The author of the article was quite up-front about the jihadist agenda for Africa: "There is no doubt that al-Qaeda and the holy warriors appreciate the significance of the African regions for the military

[4] See J. Peter Pham, "The Dangerous 'Pragmatism' of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 2, no. 1 (January-June 2011): 15-29.

[5] See ibid, "Next Front? Evolving U.S.-African Strategic Relations in the 'War on Terrorism' and Beyond," *Comparative Strategy* 26, no. 1 (2007): 39-54.

campaigns against the Crusaders. Many people sense that this continent has not yet found its proper and expected role and the next stages of the conflict will see Africa as the battlefield."

With analytical precision, Abu Azzam then proceeded to enumerate and evaluate what he perceives to be significant advantages to shifting terrorist operations to Africa, including: the fact that jihadist doctrines have already been spread in many African countries; the political and military weakness of African governments; the easy availability of a wide range of weapons; the geographical position of Africa vis-à-vis international trade routes; the proximity to old conflicts against "Jews and Crusaders" in the Middle East as well as emergent ones like Darfur, which is explicitly mentioned; the poverty of Africa "will enable the holy warriors to provide some finance and welfare, thus, posting there some of their influential operatives"; the technical and scientific skills that potential African recruits would bring; the presence of large Muslim communities, including ones in conflict with Christians or other Muslims; the links to Europe through North Africa "which facilitates the move from there to carry out attacks"; and the fact that Africa has a wealth of natural resources, including hydrocarbons and other raw materials, which are "very useful for the holy warriors in the intermediate and long term." What Abu Azzam wrote about Africa in general could very well be interpreted to point to Nigeria in particular.

In short, while conclusive evidence is not available—at least in on open-source basis—of connections between Boko Haram and other extremist networks, there is sufficient plausible basis to warrant the commitment of greater resources to examining the possibilities as well as enhancing our understanding the overall geopolitical and socio-cultural dynamics of the Sahel.

Possible Impact

It might be useful to recall why Nigeria is so important, both in its own right and for U.S. strategic interests. With proven petroleum reserves conservatively estimated to amount to some 36 billion barrels—the largest in Sub-Saharan Africa and the tenth-largest in the world—Nigeria is America's fourth-largest supplier of oil imports. Last year, the United States imported an average of 1,025,000 barrels of oil per day from the West African country, according to the Department of Energy's Energy Information Administration (by comparison, an average of 2,532,000, 1,280,000, and 1,094,000 barrels per day were imported from Canada, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia, respectively). Nigerian output and, consequently, exports to the United States, would have been considerably greater if insurgents and criminal gangs in the oil-rich Niger Delta did not routinely disrupt operations and cause oil companies to declare *force majeure* and suspend production. Moreover, Nigeria's export blends tend to be the light or "sweet" crudes preferred by U.S. refiners as a gasoline feedstock because they are largely free of sulfur, unlike the heavy, high-sulfur oils hailing from Caribbean or Persian Gulf sources.

Nigeria's significance to American interests goes beyond its acknowledged importance as an energy supplier. Nigeria's population of just shy of 150 million people makes it the eighth most

populous country in the world and by far the most populous in Africa. Historically, the country has played a major role in resolving the conflicts besetting the continent and has long been the largest African contributor to United Nations peacekeeping operations. Currently, 5,622 Nigerian military and police personnel are deployed in seven United Nations operations in Africa—the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), the African Union/UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), and the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI)—in addition to those working with blue-helmeted forces in places as far away as Haiti, Lebanon, and Timor L'Este. Given that America's willingness to undertake such assignments is rather limited even if U.S. forces were not themselves stretched, the value of such a reliable regional partner should not be underestimated. As President Obama emphasized in his meeting last year with Nigeria's President Goodluck Jonathan, "a strong, democratic, prosperous Nigeria is in the U.S. national interest."

Thus there should be considerable concern that a country of such geopolitical importance should find itself threatened by a terrorist group like Boko Haram, which has for its mission the bringing down of the Nigerian state itself. And the concern should be magnified in the face of the somewhat lackadaisical attitude of Nigerian senior Nigerian officials to the challenge they are confronted with. The late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua left for a state visit to Brazil right in the middle of the 2009 uprising and, only upon his return, set up a commission of inquiry headed by the then-National Security Adviser, retired Major General Abdullahi Sarki Mukhtar. That panel never formally published its findings into the death of Boko Haram's leader and its work was eventually superseded by another commission appointed by President Goodluck Jonathan. Moreover, worse than the less-than-fully-committed reactive capacity are the instances of actual complicity with the militants. As with the post-electoral violence across northern Nigeria earlier this year following what was arguably the best-run elections in the country's history, there have been no shortage of politicians willing to exploit religious and other divides in the furtherance of their own ambitions. Just last Tuesday, a sitting federal senator from the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), Mohammed Ali Ndume of Borno State, was arrested for his ties to Boko Haram.

While, at least for the moment, the threat which Boko Haram might pose to oil and natural gas producing areas in the southeastern Niger Delta and off the Nigerian coast in the Gulf of Guinea is minimal—distance aside, ethnic differences between the Hausa-Fulani of the north and the Yoruba, Igbo, Ijaw, and other peoples of southern Nigeria represent not insignificant hurdles for Boko Haram militants aspiring to operate there—it should be recalled that less than a year ago quite a number of Nigerian and international analysts assured themselves that the group could not project power as far as the Federal Capital Territory. Furthermore, it should not be so quickly forgotten that it was just a few years ago, between 2006 and 2009, that local militant groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which were poorly

armed and trained in comparison with Boko Haram, succeeded in slashing Nigeria's oil production from 2.6 million barrels a day to as low as around 1 million barrels a day.

There is also reason to be concerned about U.S. and other expatriate persons and business interests in Nigeria and the threat to them posed by Boko Haram. On May 12, 2011, for example, two engineers—a Briton and an Italian—employed by B. Stabilini, an Italian construction firm that was building a branch office of the Central Bank of Nigeria in Birnin Kebbi, the capital of Kebbi state in northwestern Nigeria on the border with Niger and Benin, and were seized by armed attackers from their company apartment. A ransom video delivered to a news agency subsequently claimed that the two men were being held by AQIM. The suspicion is that Boko Haram or groups linked to it, either in imitation of or in collaboration with AQIM, were actually responsible for the operation and the claim of responsibility for AQIM was an attempt to exploit the latter group's fearsome "brand name" in the Sahelian kidnapping-for-ransom racket.

The Nigerian response to all of this has fluctuated between attempts to minimize threat perception to ham-fisted security operations like the "Operation Flush" security sweeps in the northwestern part of the country which have further inflamed public opinion against the government. While Nigeria is an important partner on the global stage—one that aspires to an even more prominent role within the international community—its friends, including the United States, would do well to help it see the importance of getting its house in order first. This entails not only improving its political, legal, and security responses to terrorist threats, but also attending to multiple fault lines—religious, ethnic, regional, economic, and political—which crisscross Nigerian society.

Conclusion

All indications are that Boko Haram's support networks, both within Nigeria and outside the country, are still somewhat limited. Nevertheless, the fact that the group has been able in recent months to expand its operations beyond its base in northern Nigeria ought to be a wake-up call to both the Nigerian government and the international community. Certainly the suicide bombings targeting symbols of Nigerian state authority and the international community represented a major advance in Boko Haram's capabilities and a significant shift in its message. The effect was not only to discredit the hitherto efforts of Nigerian officials to trivialize the group as an insignificant localized problem—rather than the direct challenge to the state that it constitutes—but also to call into question the assumptions of security analysts abroad who have long minimized the risks faced by a Nigeria whose vast natural and political resources, rather than powering growth and development to the benefit of all Nigerians, have sadly for most of the last half century been consumed in a downward spiral of corruption, internal conflict, and violence.

Moreover, the recent attacks, when coupled with developments elsewhere in the Sahel, are a vivid reminder that extremism and violence cannot easily be contained by arbitrary divisions, whether on maps or in analytical frameworks. Consequently, the emergence of Boko Haram and its burgeoning capacity for violence ought to be seized upon by the United States and its partners as opportunity to more closely examine, better understand, and be more proactively engaged in confronting common challenges and advancing geopolitical, economic, and other strategic interests in this very dynamic and fluid region.[6]

[6] See ibid, "U.S. Interests in Promoting Security across the Sahara," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 32, no. 4 (July-August 2010): 242-252.