



Updated February 24, 2022

## Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province

Armed Islamist violence continues to roil northeast Nigeria and nearby border regions more than a decade since Boko Haram launched an insurgency against the Nigerian state. In recent years, an Islamic State-affiliated offshoot, the Islamic State West Africa Province (IS-WA, aka ISIS-WA or ISWAP), has established itself as the stronger faction and one of the most active IS affiliates globally. The conflict in the Lake Chad Basin (**Fig. 1**) has killed tens of thousands, displaced millions, and fueled a vast humanitarian crisis.

The United States has provided counterterrorism and other assistance to governments battling Boko Haram and IS-WA, and has been the top country donor of humanitarian assistance in the Lake Chad Basin. Abuses by local security forces in the region have been a source of concern among some Members of Congress and have raised challenges for U.S. security assistance and military sales.

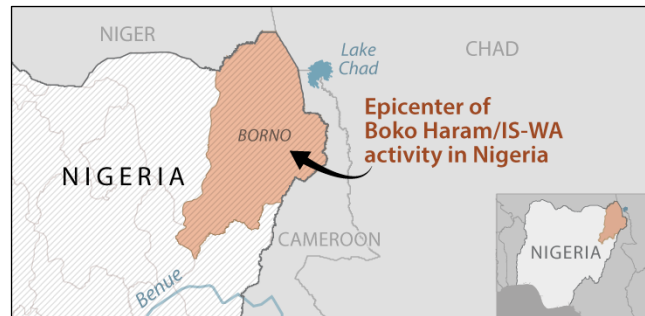
### Background and the Rise of IS-WA

Boko Haram emerged in the early 2000s as a Salafist Sunni Muslim reform movement based in Borno State, northeast Nigeria—an area long afflicted by poverty and inequality, corrupt and contentious politics, and fierce debate over the proper role of Islam in governance and society. Its founder, Muhammad Yusuf, opposed Western influence and Christianity as well as more moderate forms of Islam. After falling out with local authorities, Boko Haram launched attacks on police stations in several northern Nigerian cities in 2009. In response, Nigerian security forces detained and executed Yusuf and killed hundreds of his adherents.

Boko Haram regrouped under Yusuf's former deputy, Abubakar Shekau, expanding operations to include large-scale bombings, assertions of territorial control, and cross-border attacks in neighboring countries. It earned notoriety for its brutality, including its use of women and children as suicide bombers, and drew global attention with its 2014 abduction of 276 girls from a school in Chibok, Borno State, which gave rise to the "Bring Back Our Girls" social media campaign. In 2015, Shekau pledged allegiance to IS, and Boko Haram rebranded as IS-WA. An internal dispute later fractured the group; IS recognized another IS-WA leader in 2016, and Shekau's faction reassumed its original name, continuing to be commonly known as Boko Haram.

IS-WA has distanced itself from the indiscriminate violence that came to characterize Boko Haram, renouncing the killing of Muslim civilians and vowing to focus attacks on Christians and state targets. It reportedly has provided some state-like services (e.g., basic law enforcement) in its areas of operation, forging ties with some communities. By 2020, U.N. monitors assessed that IS-WA had "outstripped" Boko Haram in size and capacity and was operating "with a high degree of success [...] including by conducting raids on security forces, which have yielded significant war spoils in the form of materiel and other supplies."

Figure 1. The Lake Chad Basin Region



Source: CRS Graphic.

### Shekau's Death and Recent Trends

In May 2021, IS-WA militants killed Boko Haram leader Shekau, prompting thousands of people—including former Boko Haram fighters, their families, and civilians fleeing Boko Haram-held zones—to surrender to Nigerian and Cameroonian authorities. A number of Boko Haram commanders reportedly joined IS-WA following Shekau's death. One remnant Boko Haram faction remains active around Lake Chad, in far northeastern Borno State.

Shekau's death signified the demise of one of the world's most notorious extremists, and it appears to have left Boko Haram in disarray. Still, prospects for an end to violence in northeast Nigeria appear tenuous. Analysts and Nigerian officials have warned that IS-WA may prove to be a more resilient threat, citing IS-WA's efforts to build legitimacy in areas it governs and its reputedly strong resource base. As of early 2022, U.N. analysts estimated IS-WA to have 4,000-5,000 fighters. The group continues to attack military facilities, killing soldiers and looting materiel, and funds itself through raiding, kidnapping for ransom, and taxing local populations and commerce. Primarily active in northeast Nigeria, IS-WA also continues to mount attacks in adjacent zones of neighboring countries, primarily targeting local military positions.

Amid rising insecurity in other parts of northern Nigeria and in the Sahel region, to Nigeria's north, concern has mounted over a possible convergence of security threats. U.N. investigators report that IS-WA has links to another IS faction, known as IS-Greater Sahara, active in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, though each group appears primarily focused on local aims. Some Boko Haram members have reportedly moved west, establishing a cell in Nigeria's Niger State (**Fig. 2**) that claimed several attacks in 2021. In neighboring Kaduna State, another Boko Haram splinter group known as Ansaru, which claims affiliation with Al Qaeda, has apparently reactivated after a period of dormancy, preaching in local mosques and clashing with criminal groups. Other former Boko Haram combatants reportedly have joined criminal gangs in rural northwest and north-central Nigeria known locally as "bandit" groups.

**Figure 2. Nigeria's Niger and Kaduna States**

Source: CRS graphic.

## Nigerian and Regional Responses

Nigerian security forces have struggled to maintain pressure on Boko Haram and IS-WA. For several years, Nigeria's military has concentrated its troop presence in semi-urban "super camps," ceding control over highways and rural areas and limiting humanitarian access and civilian protection beyond garrison towns. Aerial bombing raids and ground offensives periodically claim numerous militant fatalities, but Nigerian authorities often have proven unable to restore stability and state authority in cleared zones.

Regional military coordination has improved since the 2014 activation of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), comprising troops from Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. MNJTF operations have been episodic, and interoperability has been an enduring challenge. Each MNJTF participating country faces other pressing security challenges, diverting attention and resources away from the campaign against Boko Haram and IS-WA.

The Nigerian government's Safe Corridor program aims to encourage defections and de-radicalize former combatants. Hundreds of men and boys have participated. Analysts have raised concerns related to the program, including with poor screening that has resulted in misclassification of civilians as militants, abuses against participants, and opposition by some officials and local communities to the reintegration of ex-militants into society. Nigerian efforts to reintegrate women and girls have been more limited. De-radicalization efforts in other countries have been slow to advance.

## Human Rights Issues

Human rights groups have accused regional security forces of extensive abuses during counterinsurgency operations, including arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and torture. Nigeria's Air Force, which has been a focus of U.S. security assistance and military sales, has killed hundreds of civilians in bombing raids. Regional militaries have arrested thousands of people for alleged ties to Boko Haram or IS-WA, often with little evidence, according to human rights observers. Many detainees have been held in inhumane conditions for years while awaiting trial; in Nigeria alone, Amnesty International estimated that "likely more than 10,000" people, many of them children, died in military custody between 2011-2020 in connection with the conflict. The United Nations and others have cited state abuses as a leading trigger of extremist recruitment.

## U.S. Policy and Issues for Congress

The United States has supported efforts to combat Boko Haram and IS-WA through capacity-building assistance for security forces in the region, the provision of equipment to regional militaries (e.g., through the Foreign Military Sales and Excess Defense Articles programs), and logistics and advisory support for the MNJTF. From 2015 to 2020, U.S. Africa Command maintained an intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operation in northern Cameroon, involving up to 300 U.S. personnel; the Trump Administration ended that deployment. The State Department has managed some counterterrorism assistance for Lake Chad Basin militaries, and is supporting the development of a Nigerian Police Force unit to assume civilian law enforcement duties in the northeast. From 2014 to 2020, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) administered a program in Nigeria to help counter extremist recruitment and reintegrate former extremists.

Between FY2014 and FY2020 (latest full year available), the State Department and USAID provided roughly \$2.3 billion in humanitarian assistance for the Lake Chad Basin region, most of it for Nigeria. Humanitarian groups in Nigeria have raised concerns with access constraints and other operational challenges in the northeast, including restrictions imposed by the Nigerian military. Congress may consider to what extent such restrictions may impede U.S.-supported humanitarian relief efforts.

Abuses by regional security forces have posed challenges for U.S. security cooperation, particularly with Nigeria and Cameroon. In 2014, the Obama Administration blocked a planned transfer of U.S.-origin military helicopters from Israel to Nigeria, partly due to human rights concerns; in January 2017, it froze a planned sale of 12 A-29 Super Tucano aircraft to Nigeria after a Nigerian jet bombed a displacement camp. The Trump Administration revived the latter sale; Nigeria received the aircraft in 2021. In 2021, some Members of Congress reportedly placed an informal, pre-notification hold on a proposed sale of 12 AH-1 Cobra helicopters to Nigeria. The National Defense Authorization Acts for FY2018 and FY2020 (P.L. 115-91, P.L. 116-92) required executive branch reports to Congress on Nigerian efforts to improve civilian protection and accountability for security force abuses. In Cameroon, the State Department withheld nearly \$18 million in planned security assistance in 2019 amid mounting concerns over the conduct of Cameroon's military, including in the context of a separatist conflict in the country's west that began in 2017. Some funds had reportedly been subject to congressional holds.

U.S. "Leahy laws," which prohibit most types of U.S. security assistance to foreign security force units implicated in gross human rights violations, have prohibited U.S. assistance for certain units in the Lake Chad Basin region. In 2021, the State Department designated Nigeria under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act (Title IV, P.L. 110-457) due to the use of child soldiers by state-backed militias battling Boko Haram and IS-WA, triggering restrictions on U.S. security assistance in FY2022. President Biden waived restrictions pursuant to the Act, citing U.S. national interest.

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