



**CNA Small Group Discussion:  
Aiding Cameroon's Effort to Counter Boko Haram**

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**Introduction**

On Wednesday, February 18, 2015, CNA convened a small group meeting to discuss Cameroon's efforts to counter the revolutionary insurgent group Boko Haram and what the United States can do to aid these efforts.<sup>1</sup> Participants included key stakeholders from United States government (USG) agencies, think tanks, and international agencies. The meeting was held under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution to allow for a candid discussion among participants.

As the group Boko Haram continues to wreak havoc inside Nigeria, it has also been launching attacks and raids into neighboring countries, Cameroon chief among them. Cameroon has been increasingly drawn into the conflict and in 2014 deployed troops to its north to protect its border region. However, this action alone has not quelled the threat of Boko Haram to Cameroon, and the United States has found itself devoting more time and resources to assist in countering this group. The purpose of this small group meeting was to explore further avenues of U.S. support to Cameroon for countering Boko Haram.

**Background**

Since 2009, Boko Haram has waged a campaign of violence and intimidation in Nigeria, mostly in the country's northeast. Thousands of civilians have been killed, and the pace of violence seems to have increased in recent months. The government of Nigeria has seen the conflict as a terrorism issue, and has relied on a narrow, largely military response. Despite its efforts to quell the rising tide of violence, it has thus far been erratic and less than effective in combating Boko Haram. CNA's analysis (with which the small group participants agreed) is that the Boko Haram conflict is an insurgency requiring a broad-based, whole-of-government response that addresses the conflict's underlying economic, political, and social root causes. Because Nigeria seems reluctant to take that approach and because Boko Haram has been launching attacks and raids into neighboring countries, two recently completed CNA studies, *Rethinking the U.S. Approach to Boko Haram: The Case for a Regional Strategy* and *Diagnosing the Boko Haram Conflict: Grievances, Motivations, and Institutional Resilience in Northeast Nigeria*, recommended that the United States focus on supporting a regional approach to the conflict that would include Nigeria's neighbors.<sup>2</sup>

**The Nature of Boko Haram as an Organization**

Boko Haram is often characterized as being Kanuri, referring to the ethnic group living largely in the lands of the former Kanem-Bornu Empire in northeast Nigeria, southeast Niger, western Chad, and northern Cameroon (an area now referred to as the Lake Chad Basin region). However, several participants

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<sup>2</sup> J. McQuaid et al., *Rethinking the U.S. Approach to Boko Haram: The Case for a Regional Strategy*, CNA Corporation, DRM-2014-U-009462-Final, Feb. 2015; and P. Asfura-Heim et al., *Diagnosing the Boko Haram Conflict: Grievances, Motivations, and Institutional Resilience in Northeast Nigeria*, CNA Corporation, DOP-2014-U-009272-Final, Jan. 2015.



cautioned that analysts should not overstate the ethnic factor in this conflict. They pointed to the fact that, while Boko Haram’s leaders are Kanuri, the group does not espouse “Kanurism”; nor does it rely on Kanuri grievances to legitimize its actions.

Maiduguri, the capital and largest city in Borno State in northeast Nigeria, has played a key role in the Boko Haram conflict over time. Participants suggested that the prevalence of Boko Haram in Nigeria’s northeast and the area surrounding it is due less to the Kanuri population in that area and more to the political and economic clout of Maiduguri. The city drew in many young men for both political/economic and religious reasons and it was there that Boko Haram’s founder, Mohammed Yusuf, started the group in 2002. Related to this, it is important to understand that the modern (“colonial”) borders dividing the Lake Chad Basin region mean little to Boko Haram (and indeed to many people living in that area), and that studying the group in a state-centric way risks misinterpreting its world view.

### **The Threat Facing Cameroon and the Government’s Response**

While the U.S. has some concerns regarding Cameroon’s human rights track record, the two countries enjoy strong relations. Cameroon is an important partner to the U.S. in Africa, and the two have cooperated on issues including economic development, public health, and increasingly, regional security. After Mohammed Yusuf was killed by Nigerian security forces in Maiduguri in 2009, many of the surviving members of Boko Haram fled to Cameroon (although some members had been present there since 2003). Around 2011, Cameroon began serving as an operating base for the group. Although accurately determining Boko Haram’s membership is difficult, an estimate provided by one participant put the number of fighters at 6,000, with roughly half of them being Cameroonian. This figure surprised many participants, and some questioned the accuracy of the estimate; however, there is no doubt that Cameroonians make up a considerable part of Boko Haram. Cameroon has thus played a key role in the development and sheltering of Boko Haram (though not sanctioned by the government). It also serves as a recruiting pool for the group. To a certain degree, then, Boko Haram has spilled over from Cameroon *into* Nigeria, even as the group currently uses Nigeria as a base from which to launch attacks into neighboring countries.

It was not until 2014, after the kidnapping of Vice Prime Minister Amadou Ali’s wife from their home in Kolofata in July, that the Cameroonian government began to view Boko Haram as a threat. Even then, the issue took on political overtones, much as it has in Nigeria (for example, the conspiracy-minded in Cameroon allege that France is fomenting the Boko Haram threat in an attempt to undermine the Cameroonian government). As in Nigeria, the threat from Boko Haram facing Cameroon is most acute in the north of the country. However, also as in Nigeria, there is tension between the north and the south; many southern Cameroonians view Boko Haram as an inherently northern problem, while many in the north feel isolated and marginalized from the governance process. One participant observed that both Cameroon and Nigeria seem to function better when northerners are in control because—as is the case in both countries today—when they are not, they feel left out of the decision-making process.

Despite the tensions between north and south, Cameroon’s government is actively working to support counter-Boko Haram activities. In addition to deploying troops to its border region, Cameroon is a participatory party in the African Union (AU)-authorized Multinational Joint Task Force, which will be composed of between 7,000 and 8,000 troops from Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Benin. However, the AU



is still developing a concept of operations for the proposed force in order to secure UN support, and its implementation is not likely imminent.

### **Recommendations for the U.S. Going Forward**

The United States has been urging the Nigerian government to take a whole-of-government approach to the conflict, but with little success. In its role as a supporting partner to the Nigerian government, the United States has employed a wide array of programs aimed at countering Boko Haram. Going forward, however, the participants agreed with CNA's analytic conclusions that, given Nigeria's reluctance to address the root causes of the problem, a better approach might be to work with Nigeria when possible but to increase efforts to work with its neighbors to counter the threat and prevent its spread within Africa.

One participant noted that, like the government of Nigeria, the government of Cameroon has tended to rely on military force—but that it has also shown more political will to combat Boko Haram than Nigeria. Therefore, the United States should continue to assist in the training and equipping of Cameroonian forces while simultaneously stressing the importance of addressing the political, economic, and ethno-religious tensions in the country (including those between the north and south) that could contribute to the growth of Boko Haram within Cameroon.

In addition, participants discussed the idea of increasing U.S. assistance to Nigeria's other neighbors. Chad, for example, has emerged in recent weeks as a key player in the effort to counter Boko Haram. In early February, Chadian troops entered Nigeria through Cameroon to aid in the fight. Chad has a vital interest in securing key overland transit routes, on which it relies for most of its goods. These routes pass through Cameroon's north and are currently threatened by the presence of Boko Haram. The United States has offered intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support to Chad (and other regional countries, including Nigeria). However, one participant noted that Chad needs more help from the United States in terms of ammunition and other supplies.

Given the intransigence of the Nigerian government and the increasingly inter-state nature of Boko Haram's attacks, participants concluded that the United States should work more closely with Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. The dynamics of the conflict will vary from country to country, based on their unique political, economic, and social factors. In addition, regional militaries will bring varying levels of capacity and capability to the fight. As such, more in-depth analysis is needed in order to determine the role that each country should play in a regional approach to the conflict and the types of assistance the United States and other partners should provide to support that approach. Of key importance, however, is ensuring that neighboring countries do not follow Nigeria's lead and focus on a military-dominated response. With the right tools and understanding, the United States and other partners can effectively assist the nations of Cameroon, Chad, and Niger in their fight to defeat Boko Haram.

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