

# CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

## Nigeria and the Horror of Boko Haram

Public Affairs

**John Campbell, Joanne J. Myers**

### Transcript

#### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I would like to welcome you all here this morning.

Today, as part of our ongoing series, *World on Fire: Security Challenges in the Early 21st Century*, we will be focusing our attention on one of the world's most violent terrorist groups, [Boko Haram](#), based in northeast Nigeria. These Islamic extremists are one more example of how some individuals are harnessing the moral authority of religion for their own political purposes.

Our speaker is John Campbell, former U.S. ambassador to Nigeria and currently Ralph Bunch senior fellow for Africa policy studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. We are very pleased to welcome him here to this breakfast program.

For [several years](#) now, Boko Haram, an unrestrained Sunni Muslim sect, have committed brutal murders and burned villages, and have been responsible for suicide attacks and numerous kidnappings, in addition to the notorious 200 schoolgirls [taken](#) last April. All these reprehensible acts have been committed in their quest to abolish a secular system of government and establish an Islamic state and sharia law in Nigeria.

With each attack, these savages become bolder, and it has become quite evident that their ambitions are not contained by national boundaries. They have extended their military campaigns into neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. Like [ISIS](#) [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] did in [Syria](#) and [Iraq](#), the group is targeting its neighbors, adapting its tactics and conscripting widely, with a goal to destabilizing not only Nigeria but all of west Africa.

An [election](#) scheduled to be held in February has now been postponed until later this month, and with good cause. The current president of Nigeria, [Goodluck Jonathan](#), a Christian from the south who seeks reelection after six years in power, alleges he alone can no longer contain the Islamic insurgency that is Boko Haram in the northeast.

But why have efforts to stop Boko Haram been so unsuccessful, why is this group able to act with such impunity, and why has Goodluck Jonathan failed to stop them? This is a precarious moment for Nigeria. After listening to John Campbell, you will understand why not only Africa but U.S. policymakers should be concerned with the rise of this Islamic extremist group and what is happening in this African nation.

Please join me in giving a very warm welcome to a very knowledgeable guest, our speaker today,

Ambassador John Campbell.

Thank you for joining us.

## Remarks

**JOHN CAMPBELL:** Thank you so much.

Good morning. I would like to thank the Carnegie Council for the invitation to be with you this morning and for the opportunity to participate in a discussion of [Boko Haram](#).

Like other radical insurgencies, Boko Haram is fueled by poor governance, political marginalization, and its region's deepening impoverishment. However, I will also maintain that Boko Haram is also shaped by specifically Nigerian circumstances and factors.

Boko Haram may be loosely translated to mean "Western education is forbidden." That is an outsider term that they themselves never use. Instead, they call themselves "the people committed to the removal of innovation and jihad." The group's stated goal is to establish God's kingdom on earth and, through the rigid implementation of Islamic law, or sharia, deliver justice for the poor. Boko Haram's rhetorical focus on providing for the poor highlights that it is, among other things, an insurrection of the poor against the rich within an Islamic context. But it has published no concrete plan for economic development or poverty alleviation.

To establish a true Islamic society, the group seeks to [destroy](#) the secular Nigerian state and root out Western influences. It also seeks to destroy the traditional Islamic establishment in Nigeria, which, Boko Haram argues, has sold out to the secular state and is therefore no longer Islamic.

Now, where did Boko Haram come from? After the reestablishment of civilian government in Nigeria in 1999, led by a Christian president, [Olusegun Obasanjo](#), some Nigerians in the north renewed the periodic protests against what they saw as misgovernment, corruption, and exploitation of the poor by Nigeria's political economy controlled by a narrow elite. They chose to withdraw from the world so they would have little contact with the government. In some places, communities as large as 5,000 people set up self-sufficient habitats where they could live according to their religious dictates. These were mostly nonviolent communities, however extreme they might have been in their religious thought and interpretations.

Boko Haram grew out of one such community. In 2002, the charismatic preacher [Mohammed Yusuf](#) established a large community at the Railway Quarter Mosque in Borno state's capital city of Maiduguri. Like other such teachers, his support came from the grassroots. But his followers also included some individuals from the very northern Nigerian Islamic establishment that it would subsequently seek to destroy.

As did other radical reformers, Yusuf rejected modern science and Western education, in part, because they are not anchored in a literalist reading of the [Quran](#). In a recorded sermon at a Maiduguri mosque, he asserted that the earth is flat because the Quran and other early texts say nothing about it being round.

In 2009, Yusuf's community [transformed](#) into a violent movement. That year some Boko Haram members confronted the police under very murky circumstances. A fight ensued and several police officers were killed. The reaction was a police and military crackdown on the section of Maiduguri where Yusuf and his community lived. The security services killed an estimated 800 people.

Yusuf was captured by the military and turned over to the police, who almost immediately murdered him. They also murdered several members of his family. The event was covered in real-time by an Al Jazeera video that went viral on Nigerian social media.

After Yusuf's death, his followers reorganized under the leadership of his deputy, Imam [Abubakar Shekau](#). Since 2010, the movement, with partners and accretions, has waged a bloody campaign against the secular state. The Council on Foreign Relations' [Nigeria Security Tracker](#) estimates that Boko Haram has killed almost 11,000 people and that there have been 25,000 people killed in the fighting between Boko Haram and the Nigerian state.

Boko Haram singles out for killing soldiers, police, and government officials whenever it can. It also kills Muslims associated with the secular government who, it maintains, are no longer Muslims but infidels who, under sharia, deserve to die. While its killing of Christians has been widely publicized, estimates are that about two-thirds of its victims have been Muslims.

Now, the Nigerian context for this radical movement. Despite Nigeria's oil wealth, poverty has been getting worse over the past decade in the Muslim north while parts of the south are booming. The northern textile industry has collapsed, cross-border trade has declined, desertification is displacing cattle herders, and agriculture cannot support the huge increase in population. The social statistics in the north are significantly worse than in the south. One example: female literacy in any language in the north is about 20 percent; in the south it is in the high 80s.

Further, faith matters. Nigeria is divided more or less evenly between Islam and Christianity. Twelve of the 36 states, all in the north, have full or partial sharia or Islamic law. From a Western perspective, Nigerians, both Christians and Muslims, are highly religious. Almost everybody in what Westerners would regard as secular circumstances uses a faith vocabulary. Causation of events, big or small, public or private, is routinely ascribed to divine intervention or the willful lack thereof.

Christians and Muslims in Nigeria commonly reject as ungodly the Western concept of separation of the religious and secular spheres of life. Christians are somewhat more tolerant of Western-style secularism than Muslims are. But recent legislation criminalizing gays and gay activity was highly popular among both Christians and Muslims.

Boko Haram insurgents and other protest movements draw on this deep-seated religiosity. In the north there is no vocabulary of social protest other than the Islamic.

Little is known about the biography of Abubakar Shekau, usually identified from his videos as the most prominent Boko Haram leader. Estimates of his age run from 35 to 45. It is unclear whether he was born in Nigeria or in Niger. He has multiple wives, including widows of Mohammed Yusuf. He mostly communicates with the general public through video clips. In them he usually speaks Hausa, Arabic, and Kanuri, the last the language of his ethnic group. In one of his videos, however, he speaks educated English. Recordings of his pre-2009 sermons given at Maiduguri mosques indicate that he is a persuasive speaker with excellent classical Arabic and well versed in Islamic scholarship.

The police claimed to have killed him in 2009, at the same time they murdered Mohammed Yusuf. Since then, the authorities have claimed to have killed him in various shootouts. Each time, however, Shekau has released another video, and his spokesmen have issued more than 30 statements to the Nigerian press. Nevertheless, no outsider has actually seen him since 2009.

Shekau seems to understand the propaganda value of violence. In one of his videos, he said, "I enjoy killing anyone that God commands me to kill, the way I enjoy killing chickens and rams." Boko

Haram videotapes its beheadings and posts them on the web.

Shekau utterly rejects democracy as fundamentally anti-Islamic. In another video, Shekau states that, "The concept of government of the people, by the people, for the people cannot continue to exist. It shall soon, very soon, be replaced by government of Allah, by Allah, for Allah."

In common with other radicals in northern Nigeria, who are not necessarily violent, Shekau sees the modern secular state as usurping the place of God and requiring the worship of its citizens. He cites as examples the oath of allegiance and the [national anthem](#). If a Muslim violates the central premise that there is no God but God, he is an infidel and an idol worshipper, the state in this case being the idol, and the penalty for idol worship under sharia is death. This is true for those Muslims who participate in state activities, such as attendance at secular schools. So Muslim students at secular schools merit death if male or sale into slavery if female, which is what Shekau has said was the fate of the [Chibok schoolgirls](#).

It is important here to stress that Shekau is not a [9/11 Osama bin Laden](#) figure, directing Boko Haram centralized attacks from a cave. Shekau's authority over Boko Haram elements, beyond the original followers of Mohammed Yusuf, appears absent or incomplete. Other jihadist groups, as well as offshoots or splinters of Boko Haram, have appeared in several places across northern Nigeria that do not appear to be under his command and control, even if they use his rhetoric and share his goals. Criminal gangs also put themselves under the Boko Haram umbrella, but obviously not its authority.

The national [elections](#) in 2011 accelerated the general northern alienation from the Abuja government that feeds Boko Haram. The two leading candidates were the incumbent president, [Goodluck Jonathan](#), a southern Christian, and [Muhammadu Buhari](#), a northern Muslim. Supporters of these presidential candidates overly employed religious rhetoric and ethnic identity appeals in their campaigns.

There was a common perception in the north that Buhari would win the elections with the largest popular vote. Nevertheless, Jonathan triumphed at the polls in elections that the international community was too quick to deem free and fair. The country bifurcated, with all of the predominantly Muslim states in the north going for Buhari and Jonathan taking nearly all of the rest, often by improbably high margins (98 percent, 99 percent).

There were credible rumors that a number of establishment northern Islamic leaders had accepted payoffs to support Jonathan. This was widely perceived as the Muslim establishment betraying Islam. Hence, there was a wave of violent protest against traditional Islamic leaders when the election results were announced.

The aftermath of the elections saw the greatest [bloodshed](#) of any period since the end of the civil war, the [Biafran War](#) from 1967–1970. The violence does not appear to have been sparked by Boko Haram, as it occurred while Shekau's followers were still regrouping after Yusuf's death. But it was a manifestation of the public anger at the national and Islamic establishments that Boko Haram now feeds on.

The upcoming national [elections](#) on March 28 are a rematch between Jonathan and Buhari. As in 2011, it is widely expected that the north will support Muhammadu Buhari against incumbent president Goodluck Jonathan.

Many in northern Nigeria, including governors and senators, will say off the record that national

politicians and the security services are colluding with Boko Haram to make the north ungovernable, and thereby exclude the region from the elections of 2015, guaranteeing Jonathan's reelection. In the Christian south, it is similarly alleged that Boko Haram is in cahoots with northern politicians, seeking to embarrass the Jonathan administration and recapture the federal government. Both have more than a whiff of conspiracy theory about them. I myself think that in any organized way both are highly improbable. But it becomes a political fact that both are widely believed.

How much support does Boko Haram and other radical jihadist groups have? The government line is that they have none. Nevertheless, estimates of Boko Haram fighters range from 5,000 to 50,000, and the persistence of the jihadist insurgency since 2009 indicates to me that it has some popular support. Moreover, I would like to suggest that the harsh counterterrorism policies of the Abuja government drives some popular support for, or acquiescence to, Boko Haram.

President Goodluck Jonathan has declared a state of emergency in the three northern states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. The army, the state security service, and the police have been consolidated into a joint task force, normally referred to as the JTF. The goal is to destroy Boko Haram. The JTF in some places is assisted by irregular vigilantes, called the Civilian JTF. They are not under military discipline.

There are flows of refugees and internally displaced persons fleeing Boko Haram, but also fleeing the security services. As many as 10,000 refugees have crossed into Niger, others have fled to Cameroon, and still others have stayed in Nigeria but went to other parts of the country. A credible estimate is that there are 1,500,000 internally displaced persons in northern Nigeria.

The JTF and the Civilian JTF target young men as members of Boko Haram, too often with no proof. Following Boko Haram attacks, it is common to hear stories of young men being rounded up indiscriminately. Human rights organizations and the Western press, including *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, have documented security service human rights abuses, especially extrajudicial killings. But the Nigerian government consistently asserts that allegations by human rights organizations are untrue and denies that hundreds of prisoners are dying in detention centers. It refuses to investigate credible allegations of human rights abuses.

President [Obama](#) raised human rights abuses with President Goodluck Jonathan when the two met in September. Secretary [Kerry](#) made the same point to President Jonathan last May. These démarches appear to have had no public impact on the Nigerian government or on the behavior of the security services.

It is difficult to see how Boko Haram will end. Unlike other insurrections, it has not moved to create an alternative government. In the past, millenarian religious movements in northern Nigeria have burned themselves out. Boko Haram killing of Muslims may turn the population against it, or the JTF could drive it deep into the bush.

Confronted by a powerful and vicious Boko Haram, what is the outlook for the 2015 elections, now scheduled for March 28? First, the elections could be held with minimum turnout in the north and much Boko Haram violence against those who do try to vote. Recent local elections in Yobe, an area of Boko Haram activity, had a turnout of less than 8 percent. The risk is such elections would have little credibility in the north.

Or the elections could be postponed again. The question here is, for how long? Inauguration day is May 29, and that date is fixed in the constitution. If large parts of the north, the electoral base for the opposition, cannot vote, Jonathan, with heavy southern and Christian support, will almost certainly

win.

In the meantime, there is no silver bullet for Boko Haram. However, the Abuja government's military approach to Boko Haram is changing. After the Nigerian elections were postponed in February, the Nigerian military launched a new offensive and has reclaimed several towns in what was considered Boko Haram territory. Yet, the current situation is hazy at best. There are now many actors on the ground, including military forces from Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, who are fighting against Boko Haram incursions into their own territories.

Who is doing what and why is unclear. As recently as February 17, 36 mourners were killed when an unknown military aircraft [bombed](#) a funeral procession in Niger. It is suspected that the mourners were wrongly targeted as members of Boko Haram. So when the military announces that it has killed 200 members of Boko Haram, there is nearly always the question of who they really were.

It is also unclear how concerned Boko Haram is with actually holding territory. Instead, they seem to prefer hit-and-run tactics, often raiding villages and withdrawing. By doing this and being more fluid, the group reduces the risk of defeat at the hands of the military and can operate in a far larger, expansive territory.

It is a truism that when dealing with an insurrection if a government does not win, it loses. By that standard, Abuja is still failing, despite its reoccupation of towns formerly held by Boko Haram.

The government's current counterterrorism strategy needs to be replaced with an approach designed to reconcile and win over the alienated population in the north and thereby deprive Boko Haram of its oxygen. The national security advisor, [Sambo Dasuki](#), in April 2014 unveiled a credible counter-insurgency strategy, but implementation has been slow, in part because of the pervasive insecurity in the north. But, if little is done to address the core grievances of the north, even if the JTF destroys Shekau and his followers, they will be replaced by another similar movement.

Atrocities associated with the [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria](#), as well as Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, have focused renewed attention on the relationship—if any—between terrorism and Islam, the faith of some 1.6 billion people, perhaps a quarter of the earth's population. Both ISIS and Boko Haram are coalitions that consist of many different elements. A religious vision is only one dimension. Others include alienated youth, economic depression, bad governance, and predatory states. There are criminal dimensions to both, and political figures use both to advance their particular agendas. But belief colors, if it does not always determine, the direction in which Boko Haram and ISIS move.

[Graeme Wood](#) published in the March issue of *The Atlantic* an article entitled "[What ISIS Really Wants](#)." Here he is addressing the core associated with [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) and his vision of an Islamic state. Wood argues that: "The reality is that the Islamic state is Islamic. Very Islamic." He also argued that: "The religion preached by its most ardent followers derives from coherent, and even learned, interpretations of Islam." He does not argue that ISIS is Islam, but he does argue that it is a particular reading of Islam. Much of his article is concerned with an analysis of the Salafist Sunni theology that is the basis for the outlook of ISIS and Boko Haram. Salafism is characterized by the literal reading of the Quran and the earliest scriptures and the stripping away of later accretions.

Boko Haram also draws on a coherent and learned interpretation of Islamic texts, even if few other Muslims accept their reading. Yet, Boko Haram insists that it represents the only valid form of Islam, a claim that ISIS also makes. With respect to law, punishment, and methods of execution, both ISIS and Boko Haram appear to be much influenced by 7th-century practices and, more recently, [Ibn](#)

[Taymiyah](#), a 13th-century theologian originally from what is now Iraq. He is seen as one of the theological pioneers of Salafism. Boko Haram's Abubakar Shekau also invokes the memory of [Usman dan Fodio](#), the Salafist reformer who created in 1806 the last emirate empire in northern Nigeria before the British conquest. Hence, Boko Haram and ISIS sound similar, if not identical, and they have expressed mutual admiration. [*Editor's note: Several days after this talk, Boko Haram pledged its allegiance to ISIS.*]

But there are significant differences beyond their differing geographies and circumstances. Among them is the emphasis that ISIS places on holding territory as the basis for a universal caliphate. Islam has existed in northern Nigeria for more than 1,000 years. It is difficult to imagine that Boko Haram would accept subordination to a caliphate based in the Middle East. Indeed, Abubakar Shekau has established his own Islamic state.

But its character is different from al-Baghdadi's. When Shekau says that the Nigerian town of Gwoza is part of an Islamic state, he seems to mean that it is no longer part of the secular Nigerian state, but instead is part of the greater Islamic community, without any reference to a caliphate. Al-Baghdadi's vision of a caliphate does appear to motivate certain Europeans and North Americans to go to the Middle East and fight for ISIS. By contrast, Boko Haram attracts no foreign fighters.

Both ISIS and Boko Haram are authoritarian and reject compromise. But Boko Haram's leadership and structure appears much more diffuse. ISIS is clearly a Middle Eastern terrorist organization with millenarian goals espoused by some of its leaders, especially al-Baghdadi. Boko Haram more resembles a peasants' revolt that uses Islamic vocabulary and imagery.

Among other things, Boko Haram is now a political football in the run-up to the Nigerian national elections. General Muhammadu Buhari and the opposition accuse Jonathan of failing to provide for the security of Nigerian citizens, and they promise to defeat Boko Haram. Buhari is also campaigning against corruption, which appears ubiquitous under Jonathan. For his part, Jonathan is emphasizing the recent apparent military successes against Boko Haram in the northeast.

Under these circumstances, if Boko Haram is a peasants' revolt in an Islamic context against a corrupt government dominated by Christians that refuses to address human rights abuses, what policy options are available to the United States? Up to now, the [Obama administration](#), and the West generally, has been concerned to support the electoral process, seeing free, fair, and credible elections that are accepted by most Nigerians as crucial to moving forward. That die will be cast on March 28. With the postponement of the elections from February 14, it is hard for me to imagine that any outcome will be accepted by most Nigerians.

The United States also implemented a small counterterrorism training mission with a new Nigerian military unit that has not been credibly accused of human rights abuses. However, the Jonathan government abruptly and unilaterally ended it in December. Since then, U.S. military training has been focused on Niger and Cameroon, not Nigeria.

Abuja appears unwilling to accept the accountability and transparency required by a U.S. military relationship. However, there is a humanitarian crisis in northern Nigeria, with huge numbers of refugees and displaced persons. There is a food security emergency. In some areas, there has been no plowing or harvesting for almost four years.

Eventually, the international community will almost certainly become involved. When that happens, it will be important for the United States to show leadership, as it did with the international effort to counter [Ebola](#). Nevertheless, the hard truth is that the United States and the international community

have few options and little leverage over either Abuja or Boko Haram. Resolution of the current crisis will be dependent on Nigerians themselves and not outsiders.

Thank you very much.

## Questions

**QUESTION:** James Starkman. Thank you. That was quite a primer on Islam.

Just examining the religious element, which you got into briefly, could you expand a little bit on the range of what I would call an orthodox reading of sharia in the Muslim population by imams around the world in the context of Boko Haram's reading of that context?

**JOHN CAMPBELL:** I dare not do it around the world because I don't know about it. But I can for northern Nigeria. In northern Nigeria the, if you like, orthodox, conventional Islam is highly Sufist in approach. Broadly, it is very tolerant—excellent relations, for example, with Christians; regular participation in a secular government; strongly supports, for example, the existence of state schools. In other words, it's the kind of orthodox Islam with which we are all familiar.

This is rejected by Boko Haram—but not just by Boko Haram, but by many other very small groups—some peaceful, others not so peaceful—because of the association of this kind of orthodox Islam with what is seen to be a corrupt and predatory government in Abuja.

Now, as you all know, the Islamic texts—the Quran but also other associated texts—are very rich and you can cherry-pick. That certainly is what Boko Haram does. This should not be any great surprise to us. I live in the American South, and before the [Civil War](#) the [Bible](#) was regularly cherry-picked to find justifications for slavery. It's the same kind of idea.

**QUESTION:** Richard Valcourt, *International Journal of Intelligence*.

There is speculation right now that there is a relationship being established between ISIS and Boko Haram. Number one, can you comment on that?

The second part of it is ISIS is receiving a great deal of outside funding. To what extent has that been somewhat matched by Boko Haram?

**JOHN CAMPBELL:** Let me take the second question first because it's easiest. So far as we can tell, there is no significant outside funding going into Boko Haram. Nor does Boko Haram need it. Boko Haram finances itself through bank robberies, through kidnapping. And further, the kind of terrorism that Boko Haram does is pretty cheap—you know, you steal a car, you load it up with dynamite, and you blow it up. I have seen no really compelling evidence of financial flows into Boko Haram.

As to the relationship between—or the sort of trendlines of the relationship between Boko Haram and ISIS, there are two schools. There is one that, particularly paying attention to the style of social media used by both, that there is a kind of convergence. On the other hand, evidence for any kind of transformative links between the two is very thin on the ground. Hence, though I am certainly entirely outside the government, my reading is that the State Department, the Department of Defense, and the intelligence community do not see at present time the two as coming together.

Should they come together at some point in the future, they might cooperate; they might also try to kill each other off. Both organizations are extremely bloody.

## Questions

**QUESTION:** John Hirsch, International Peace Institute.

John, first of all, thank you very much. Just two quick questions. The African Union (AU) is into this also, and they are setting up this combined joint task force together with Chad, Cameroon, and Nigeria. So what's your take on that? Is this significant? Can this make a difference?

Secondly, what about the Nigerian military? This is an army of about 100,000 people, soldiers, and of course they went into Liberia and Sierra Leone and did a very good job. So what's going on? Is there infiltration by Boko Haram into the highest ranks of the military? Why has the Nigerian military been so inept?

**JOHN CAMPBELL:** Let me start with the second one first because that's the easiest, the size of the Nigerian military. Reference books say 100,000. Many observers think in fact it now is no more than 25,000. The Nigerian military has been consistently run down by successive governments in Abuja ever since a failed military coup in 1991, the so-called *Orkar* coup. Ever since then, the Nigerian military has been starved of resources—starved of resources as a way of preventing it from staging coups.

Well, there are costs to that kind of an approach. Hence, a security budget of somewhere between \$5 billion and \$6 billion a year (that includes the police), and yet soldiers going for two or three months without being paid, being sent into firefights with Boko Haram with a total of 30 bullets, and when they run out of bullets they run. Which leads to the very interesting question of what happens to the \$5 billion-to-\$6 billion per year. I leave that to your imaginations.

In other words, the military cries out for thorough reform. A very senior Nigerian general, now no longer on active duty, told me a few months ago that the Nigerian military is as riddled with division as Nigerian society in general is. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that there are sympathizers of Boko Haram within it. And certainly, there have been numerous cases of the back gate to military bases being left unlocked. It looks very suspicious.

The AU's effort to put together some kind of coordinated response—here the extent to which it will be successful will be dependent upon the Nigerians themselves. Eventually, any such effort would reach the Security Council. Nigeria is on the Security Council.

The Nigerians up until now have been extremely hesitant about any kind of international involvement in northern Nigeria. In fact, there are Chadian soldiers operating in northern Nigeria now. Publicly, the Nigerian government tends to either ignore them altogether or say that what the Chadian soldiers are doing is what Abuja tells them to do. There is almost no press coverage of it at all.

Historically, cooperation between Nigeria and the Francophone states that surround it has been poor. So this will be something very difficult to achieve, and central to its achievement will be what the attitude of the Nigerian government is.

**QUESTION:** Ron Berenbeim.

You have spoken about the need for ultimately some kind of international response.

**JOHN CAMPBELL:** Humanitarian response.

**QUESTIONER:** Humanitarian—and for the United States to lead that. So that raised two questions in my mind. First of all, what are the fundamental U.S. security interests in this area? And second, what are the opportunities and barriers to taking leadership of such a response? One that arises immediately in my mind is China and its heavy investment in that part of the world. But I can't figure out whether they would play a positive or negative or no role at all.

**JOHN CAMPBELL:** You have raised several very interesting questions.

I would argue that Boko Haram poses no security threat to the United States at all. It does pose a major threat to U.S. national interests because those interests include a stable Nigeria, a West Africa that is increasingly able to address its own issues. And, of course, a full-scale assault on the Nigerian state is absolutely contrary to that. So we are talking about interests, not security threats.

More basic, I think, is the humanitarian dimension. Once the American media focuses on the humanitarian disaster in northeastern Nigeria, there will be domestic U.S. pressure to do something. In this sense, there is a kind of parallel with Ebola. In the particular case of the U.S. response to Ebola, it was extraordinarily successful. In fact, AFRICOM's [United States Africa Command] involvement with Ebola seems to have turned around popular opinion in West Africa with respect to AFRICOM. AFRICOM, viewed in the past as essentially neocolonial, is now seen in a very different light.

American leadership in the humanitarian realm, I think initially at least, would have to be coordination of the international effort within international organizations.

As for China, unlike other parts of Africa, the Chinese have not gotten very far in Nigeria. Their presence is not very great. The Chinese that are there tend to be either Taiwanese or Hong Kong Chinese, and they have been there since the late colonial period. They are quite different from Beijing. And the situation is very different from, say, in East Africa or even in Angola.

**QUESTION:** Allen Young.

What is the effect of the drop in oil prices on Nigeria generally and also on the election?

**JOHN CAMPBELL:** Massive. More than 70 percent of government revenue comes from oil. More than 90 percent of foreign exchange comes from oil.

The Lagos Stock Exchange has tanked. The naira has fallen against the dollar by something like 20–25 percent. What this means is in essentially a patrimonial political system in which the country is essentially run by cooperating and competing elites and the focus is the distribution of the oil revenue, there's just vastly less to go around. What that does is it stresses the system.

That's one reason why the run-up to the elections of 2015 is so much more violent than the run-up to the elections of 2011. Almost entirely absent from the American media, but the Fund for Peace has done some really quite compelling [research](#) showing that this pre-election period is extraordinarily violent. It's not only to do with Boko Haram, but an awful lot of people are getting killed. Part of that is, because of the fall of oil prices, the competition for what's left is so much more intense.

**QUESTION:** David Musher. Thank you for a very, very scholarly talk.

I'm a little bit confused, though. You've described brilliantly a religious war. And yet, your conclusion is that you are dealing with a peasant revolt. Now, with the exception of the very last response to the

question and the very first sentence of your talk, where you said that poverty nourishes Boko Haram, in what way are we talking about this peasant revolution?

**JOHN CAMPBELL:** We're talking about a peasants' revolt in this sense: It is a widespread and popular rejection of essentially the way Nigeria has been run. In this sense, there are interesting parallels with [Wat Tyler in 14th-century England](#), the [peasants' revolt in Martin Luther's time](#), and there are also certain interesting Chinese parallels.

It is also a religious civil war within Islam because the vocabulary of revolt in northern Nigeria is Islamic. And further, the establishment being revolted against in northern Nigeria is also Islamic. So you have almost a kind of layered effect.

I find it interesting that Boko Haram itself says almost nothing about economic development, better health, water programs—it says a lot about education, but it says almost nothing about economic development. What it talks about, over and over and over again, is the creation of God's kingdom on earth, the idea being that if you can reorganize society around sharia, in fact these problems will largely take care of themselves.

Now, I said something like 12 states in northern Nigeria have sharia—they do indeed. Boko Haram says—and this is perfectly true—that the sharia penalties are imposed on the poor but not on the rich. So you go steal a loaf of bread and your hand is hacked off. Go steal 5 million naira by jimmying contracts and nothing happens. So there is this element of anger, of inchoate rage, that runs all through this, if that helps.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thank you so much for your talk. It was really informative. My name is Caroline Nutt.

I was wondering if you could elaborate a little more on the relationship that Boko Haram might have with other groups within the region, such as [al-Shabaab](#) or [AQIM](#) [al-Qaeda in the Islamic Mahgreb], and how that might affect U.S. national interests.

**JOHN CAMPBELL:** I don't think it has much—not Boko Haram. But some of these other accretions that I talked about—for example, a group called [Ansaru](#) very definitely does; it has links with AQIM. It is also much more internationalist in focus. It is also vastly smaller. And it does not have the kind of populist dimension that Boko Haram has. It is easy to see Ansaru as essentially a terrorist organization, not a peasants' revolt.

The relationship between Ansaru and Boko Haram is extremely interesting. We know remarkably little about it. At one point, Ansaru said that it had broken off from Boko Haram because Boko Haram was killing too many Muslims. Subsequently, there appears to have been some kind of murderous interaction between the two, and it looked like Ansaru, presumably minus its leadership who had all been killed, was reincorporated into Boko Haram. Subsequently, however, Ansaru has reappeared. So it's very, very fluid.

**QUESTION:** John Richardson.

I wrote down four notes in your excellent presentation and I wanted to just give them to you and ask a question—"Islam, nuclear weapons, no God but God, kill each other."

Now, I don't mind if they kill each other, but what I'm really driving at is, is Islam and what the Quran says or doesn't say, what is not evident—where does Islam stand, if you can summarize it, on nuclear weapons? Are they to protect—as maybe the Iranians want to protect their Shia thing—or

are they to attack? In other words, do we need to have the [Charles Martel society](#) in every Western country with nuclear weapons ready to go to war, or can we live with Islam and nuclear weapons?

**JOHN CAMPBELL:** I have no idea what the Islamic position might be on nuclear weapons.

Part of the difficulty is the nature of Islam. Islam has texts which are read. Islam does not have a kind of Augustinian theological system with which we all agree and we all subscribe to, so that how you read those texts is going to vary from place to place, time to time, and community to community. In that sense, Islam is very different from orthodox Christianity, where authority in one form or another tends to be pretty clear. I mean, after all, the Catholic Church has the [pope](#), the Anglican communion has bishops, the Protestant churches have councils—on and on it goes.

**JOANNE MYERS:** Thank you for a really fascinating talk.

### Audio

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### Video Clips

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