

More than propaganda

A review of Boko Haram's public messages

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Messaging has been an important aspect of the public outreach of the violent extremist organisation commonly known as Boko Haram. While significant attention has been given to what Boko Haram has done in terms of violent attacks, less has been devoted to what Boko Haram has said in terms of messaging content. By examining its record of public statements, important clues can be gleaned regarding the otherwise secretive group's operational processes and strategic outlook.

Key points

- ▶ Although not always consistent, Boko Haram has ensured its narrative is publicly disseminated, which is revealing for a group that is extremely secretive.
- ▶ Messaging creates awareness about the group and its activities, which can tie into recruitment.
- ▶ Messaging demonstrates a clear pattern of expanded target groups and geographic areas, while outlining group grievances.
- ▶ Boko Haram's intended audience has shifted over time, but core groups have likely been augmented by expanding dynamics, rather than supplanted.
- ▶ Further research on Boko Haram messaging and its resonance within the local population should be conducted.
- ▶ A better understanding of the potential linkages between messaging and recruitment into Boko Haram could result in more effective programming to reduce this influence.

This report reviews Boko Haram's public statements from its resurgence in 2010 until its split into two main factions in August 2016. While Boko Haram (more accurately referred to as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad prior to its March 2015 pledge to the so-called Islamic State, and Wilayat Gharb Afriqiyah, or West Africa Province, afterwards) is often considered a factionalised group, the focus of this study is strictly on messaging emanating from the Shekau wing, given its predominant public position. This means that statements from spokespersons claiming to be speaking on behalf of the group but who either lacked credibility or later were rejected by Abubakar Shekau have been excluded. In addition, messaging prior to Shekau's emergence as leader, or by breakaway groups such as Ansaru, is also excluded, in order to limit the evaluation to Shekau's tenure.¹

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This has resulted in a database of 145 statements, which range from short phone calls by Boko Haram spokespersons to journalists, to hour-long video messages from Shekau. The total number of statements is not necessarily an exhaustive collection of Boko Haram propaganda, considering the inconsistent dissemination methods at various times in the group's history, but does represent a fairly comprehensive look at its messaging over the past seven years.²

The focus of the examination revolves around key content themes present in messaging and how those have shifted over time, revealing insights into the group's evolution and thought processes. Essentially, this approach seeks to understand to which topics the group has chosen to devote its messaging, and why. The report also includes a quantitative review of trends in Boko Haram's messaging, and concludes by drawing insights based on the messaging analysis, providing recommendations for future action.

Phases in Boko Haram messaging

Boko Haram messaging has ebbed and flowed throughout its history, while the types of messages produced and the methods utilised for dissemination have also shown similar fluctuating dynamics. In this sense, Boko Haram messaging can largely be broken down into three distinct phases, with a fourth currently underway. These phases closely revolve around the dominant personalities and/or influences present at the time.

Phase I: March 2010 to September 2012 – the Qaqa/Shekau period (79 messages)³

Starting in early 2010, spokespersons speaking on behalf of Boko Haram regularly briefed local media, providing snippets of information on group activities. Various spokespersons occupied this role until its consolidation

by Abul Qaqa in September 2011.⁴ Qaqa briefed the press on at least 53 different occasions, emerging as the second most frequently quoted public figure in the group's history. In addition, Shekau began to experiment with video messaging in the beginning of 2012, which saw the distribution of lengthy productions that explained the group's methods and vision in more detail. He thus emerged as the public face of the movement and complemented Qaqa's more direct approach. The frequency of messaging was highest during this phase, totalling 79 (or 54%) of the 145 recorded statements, despite its lasting only about two and a half years.

Phase II: September 2012 to March 2015 – Shekau's dominance (49 messages)

Boko Haram struggled to replace Qaqa as its spokesperson after his death in September 2012, even with the appointment of multiple replacements, and this vacuum resulted in Shekau handling most of the messaging.⁵ Messaging was less frequent, but overall content length increased as the number of video publications surged – comprising more than 80% of all releases from 2013 to 2015. Primarily featuring Shekau and with some clips running nearly an hour, this provided for a significant amount of airtime compared to the previous reliance on shorter press interviews. The videos showed a gradual evolution in terms of graphics and editing, but neither content nor production value changed drastically until the beginning of 2015, when external influences altered messaging dynamics in the lead-up to the bay'a (pledge) to the Islamic State.⁶

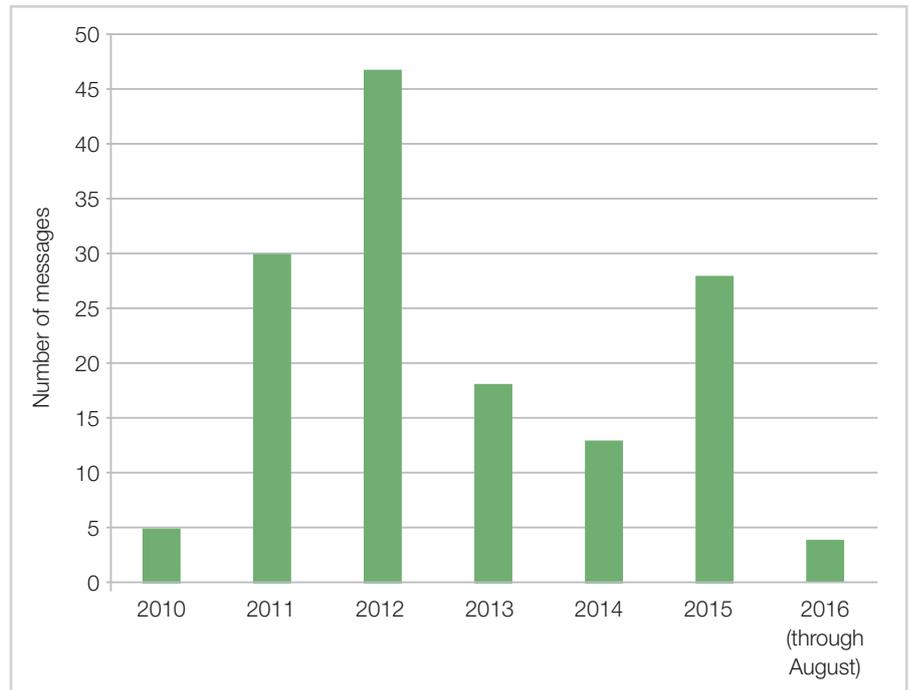
Many video tactics, such as filming ongoing attacks, displaying spoils of war or beheading enemy combatants, were not new innovations to Boko Haram messaging

Phase III: March 2015 to August 2016 – Islamic State influence (17 messages)

Following Shekau's pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State on 7 March 2015, the Media Office of the West Africa Province (MOWAP) emerged as the group's new propaganda outlet.⁷ Shekau became quiet during this period, as he was either sidelined by the changes in media strategy or sought a lower profile in accordance with Islamic State leadership standards.⁸ MOWAP propaganda continued the high-quality productions that emerged just prior to the pledge, and demonstrated significant influence in terms of content from the Islamic State. Nonetheless, many video tactics, such as filming ongoing attacks, displaying spoils of war or beheading enemy combatants, were not necessarily new innovations to Boko Haram messaging, but rather old aspects featured in a more extensive and professional manner. The MOWAP messages also offered less in terms of specific localised messaging content or grievances, but rather focused on visual displays of strength and motivational speeches from group members. These dynamics continued until

THE NUMBER OF
VIDEO PUBLICATIONS
SURGED – COMPRISING
more than
80%
OF ALL RELEASES FROM
2013 TO 2015

Figure 1: Boko Haram messaging, by year



the Islamic State replaced Shekau as leader in early August 2016 and the group split into two factions, each with distinct messaging wings.⁹

Quantitative review of Boko Haram messaging

Messaging type and dissemination

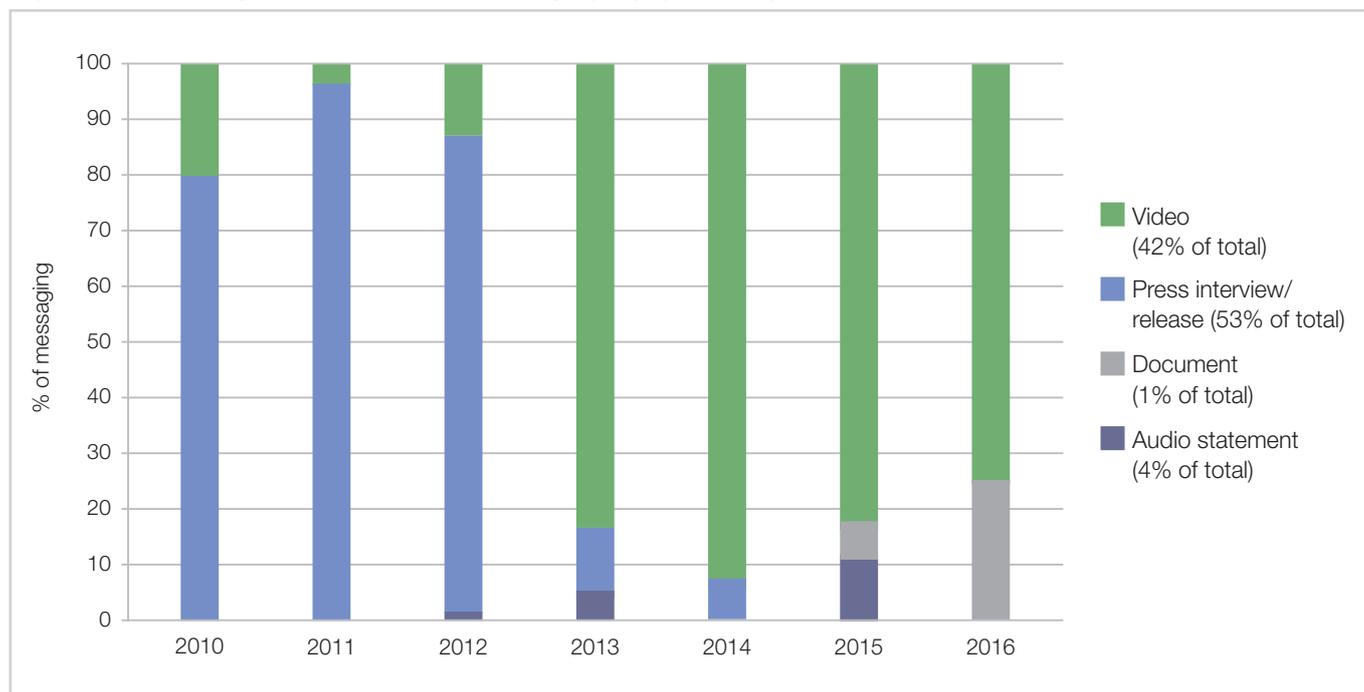
Messaging tactics in terms of both type of content produced and dissemination strategy have varied, with the group using a number of different means to get its propaganda to intended audiences. While directly speaking to the press or pre-recorded videos have been the most common messaging types, Boko Haram has also utilised fliers and social media (see call-out boxes). The group has been forced to make a number of adjustments to its dissemination strategy based on evolving local conditions – for example, Qaqa’s death deprived Boko Haram of its most communicative and well-connected spokesperson, while in 2013 Shekau complained that the Nigerian authorities were frustrating efforts to upload videos onto YouTube, forcing the group to send clips directly to select journalists instead.¹⁰ In the lead-up to Shekau’s *bay’a*, the group also experimented with social media, opening a number of Twitter accounts.

Most prominent Nigerian newspapers have covered Boko Haram messaging to varying degrees, allowing it to expand its reach within the country, but the group has demonstrated a particular relationship with a few specific outlets at various periods. Initially, the *Daily Trust* and reporter Ahmed Salkida maintained close contacts during the Muhammad Yusuf days, while BBC Hausa interviewed a number of purported spokespersons prior to Qaqa’s emergence.¹¹ Qaqa did not appear to favour any newspaper outlet



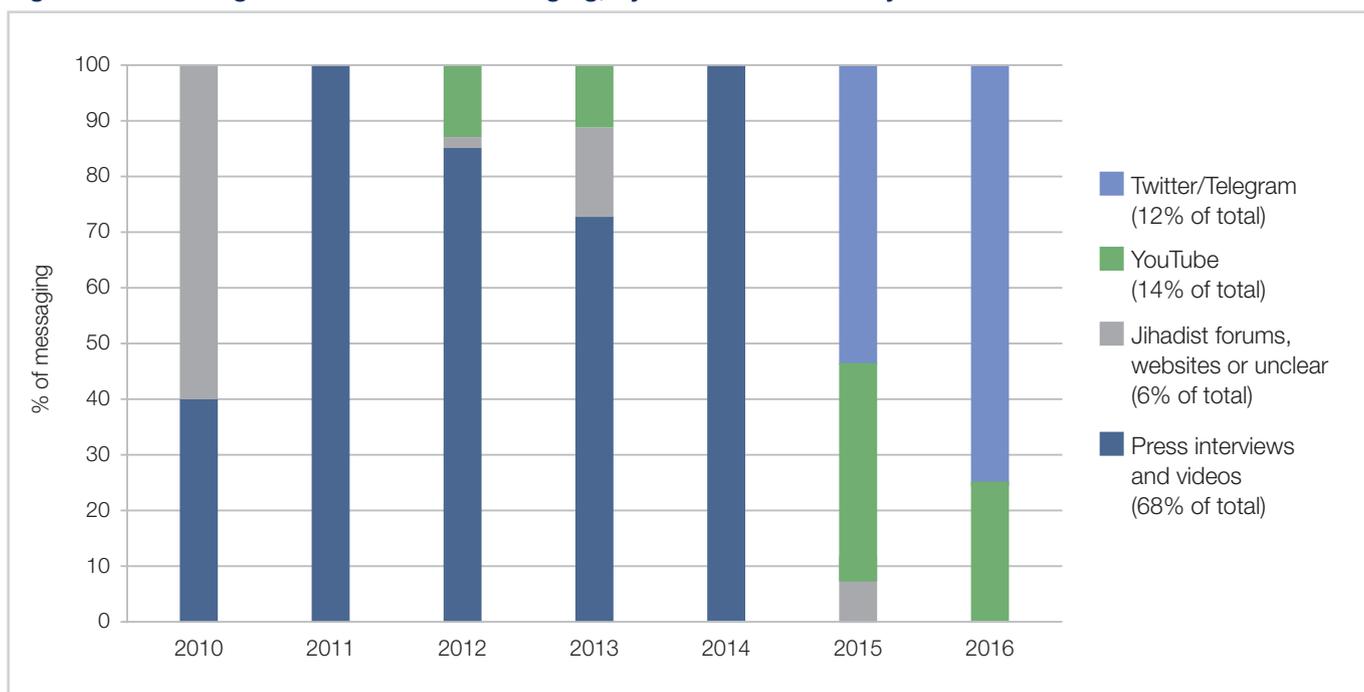
BOKO HARAM USES PRE-RECORDED VIDEOS, FLIERS AND SOCIAL MEDIA AS PART OF THEIR MESSAGING STRATEGY

Figure 2: Percentage of Boko Haram messaging, by type and year



in particular, often convening teleconferences with multiple journalists at the same time. However, *Premium Times* published at least three exclusive statements from Qaqa in 2012, and was not threatened during a 2012 message that warned many major Nigerian outlets.¹² Agence-France Presse (AFP) was a favoured recipient of Boko Haram videos in 2013–14, when the

Figure 3: Percentage of Boko Haram messaging, by dissemination and year

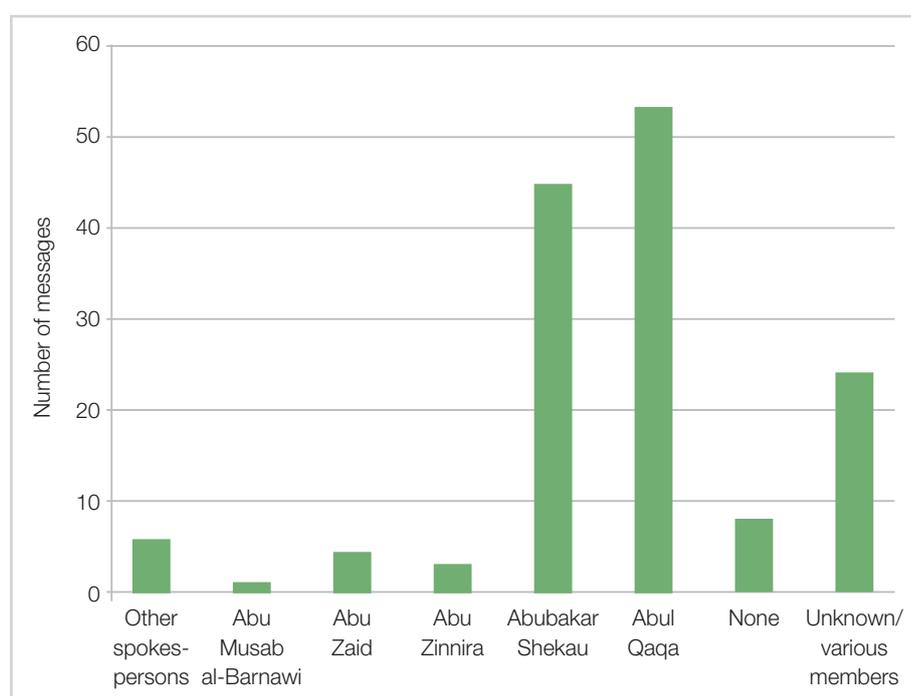


group complained about a lack of YouTube access. By 2015, Boko Haram relied almost exclusively on social media for dissemination, with Islamic State-influenced publications typically surfacing via Telegram and Twitter, while YouTube was used for more traditional statements.

Messaging personalities

Two key figures – Shekau and Qaqa – have dominated messaging across the seven-year span. Nonetheless, a few other members have featured at various points.

Figure 4: Boko Haram messaging, by speaker



Twitter

Between 22 January and 8 March 2015, in the lead-up to the pledge to the Islamic State, four Twitter accounts operating under the name al-Urwah al-Wuthqa (the Indissoluble Link) posted messaging regarding Boko Haram.¹³ Each account was suspended for violating user policies, necessitating the need for four iterations. This foray into social media demonstrated the Islamic State’s influence over Boko Haram messaging, given a previous lack of activity within this realm. The accounts distributed battlefield updates, photos from the

front lines and links to video messages, tweeting in a combination of primarily Arabic and English. The final tweet published the audio speech of Shekau offering his *bay’a* to Islamic State caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, giving rise to speculation that the al-Urwah al-Wuthqa media wing was created specifically to facilitate the admission of Boko Haram into the Islamic State. Since the suspension of that account one day after the pledge, the al-Urwah al-Wuthqa media wing no longer exists, nor has Boko Haram made another official attempt to join Twitter.

Shekau demonstrated an increasing concentration of messaging up until the Islamic State period, releasing 35 video clips. Rising from a participation rate of just 13% in all messaging in 2012, Shekau appeared in 69% of releases from the beginning of 2013 until March 2015, including 13 straight videos over a year-long span between July 2013 and August 2014. Under the Islamic State's media influence (Phase III), however, Shekau's dominant position declined, as he appeared in just three publications (19%), none of which was released through official Islamic State channels.¹⁴ In this sense, Boko Haram messaging was clearly dominated by Shekau in the past, but not all messaging should be viewed as being synonymous with the Boko Haram leader.

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Language usage

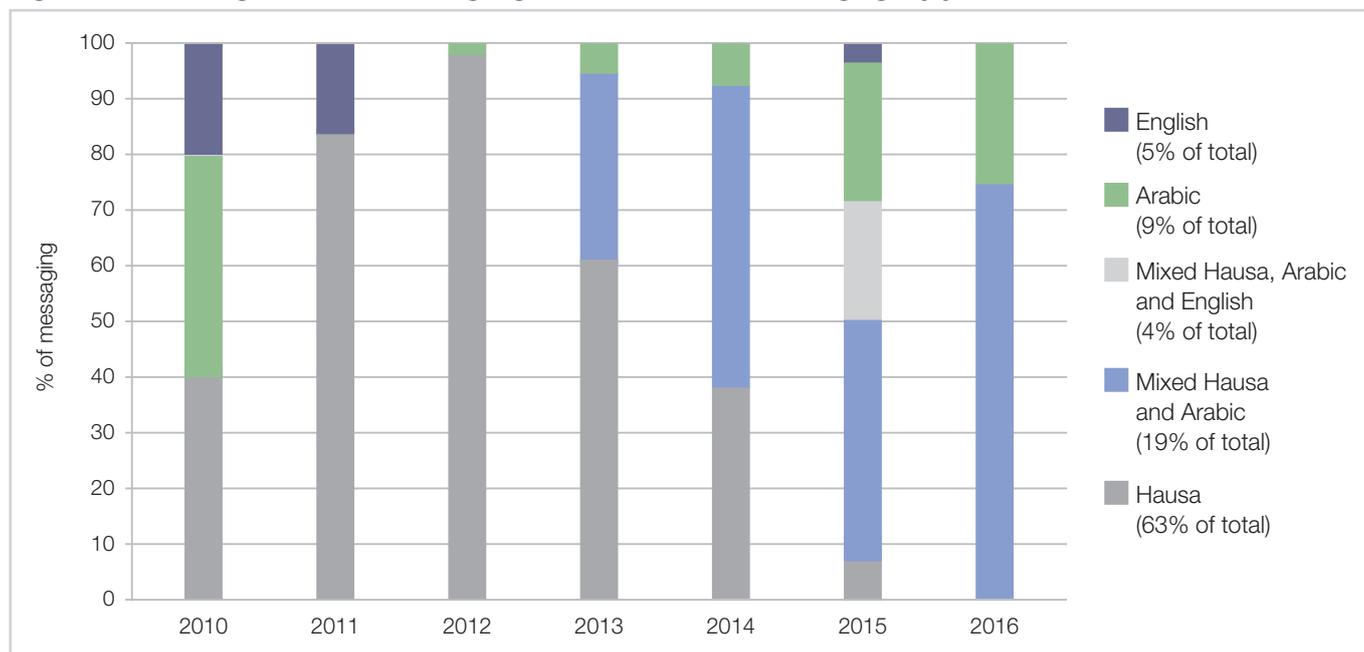
The choice of language has been another important aspect of Boko Haram messaging. While Hausa was primarily used in initial propaganda, the incorporation of Arabic increased over time, as the group likely sought a more external audience. For example, while Arabic only played a dominant role in one publication in 2011–2012, 80% of releases prominently featured the language in 2014–2015 (although typically in concert with other languages).¹⁵

Fliers

Fliers or leaflets left behind by Boko Haram militants after an attack, or posted at various locations around a town, have been another common means of outreach. Written primarily in Hausa and typically restricted to a small geographic area, they have been employed to convey specific information to a localised audience. While the usage of fliers appears to have declined over time, the importance of this aspect in Boko Haram's messaging history should not be overlooked, despite their minimised reach. For example, fliers left behind during a prison break in Bauchi in September 2010 signalled the group's renaissance, while others in Kano after the pivotal January 2012 assault on the city addressed residents and offered a justification for the violence.¹⁶

Some fliers issued threats, such as those in Maiduguri in August 2012, advising residents not to cooperate with security forces, or others that surfaced in various areas of Cameroon in January 2013, warning local authorities that Boko Haram would attack the country if it did not leave its members alone.¹⁷ Fliers served as a key means of circulating information in earlier years, albeit in a limited and localised manner. There has been little evidence of fliers in more recent years, perhaps due to experimentation in other areas and the spread of Internet technology, resulting in instantly disseminated social media messages that can provide a similar impact, but at a lower cost to a larger audience. Nonetheless, the use of fliers could still be an important aspect in more rural areas with less technological connectivity.

Figure 5: Percentage of dominant languages in Boko Haram messaging, by year



Mixed language publications, which often start out in Arabic but later contain Hausa or make frequent use of Arabic subtitles, became more common over time, demonstrating the increasing dominance of Arabic over even Hausa.¹⁸ The use of English has occurred on occasion, typically when Shekau briefly switched into the language during a video, or by way of subtitles. Other languages, such as Kanuri and Fulfulde, have also been mixed in at various times, but in a limited fashion.¹⁹

The most frequent reason for a Boko Haram message has been to claim an attack, and increase awareness of its activities along that front

Interestingly, Boko Haram did not branch out significantly into French productions despite expanding its struggle to include the francophone nations of Niger, Chad and Cameroon.²⁰ Rather, it appears as though it relied on reaching neighbouring audiences with Hausa as a lingua franca, or via Arabic for those with extensive religious education.

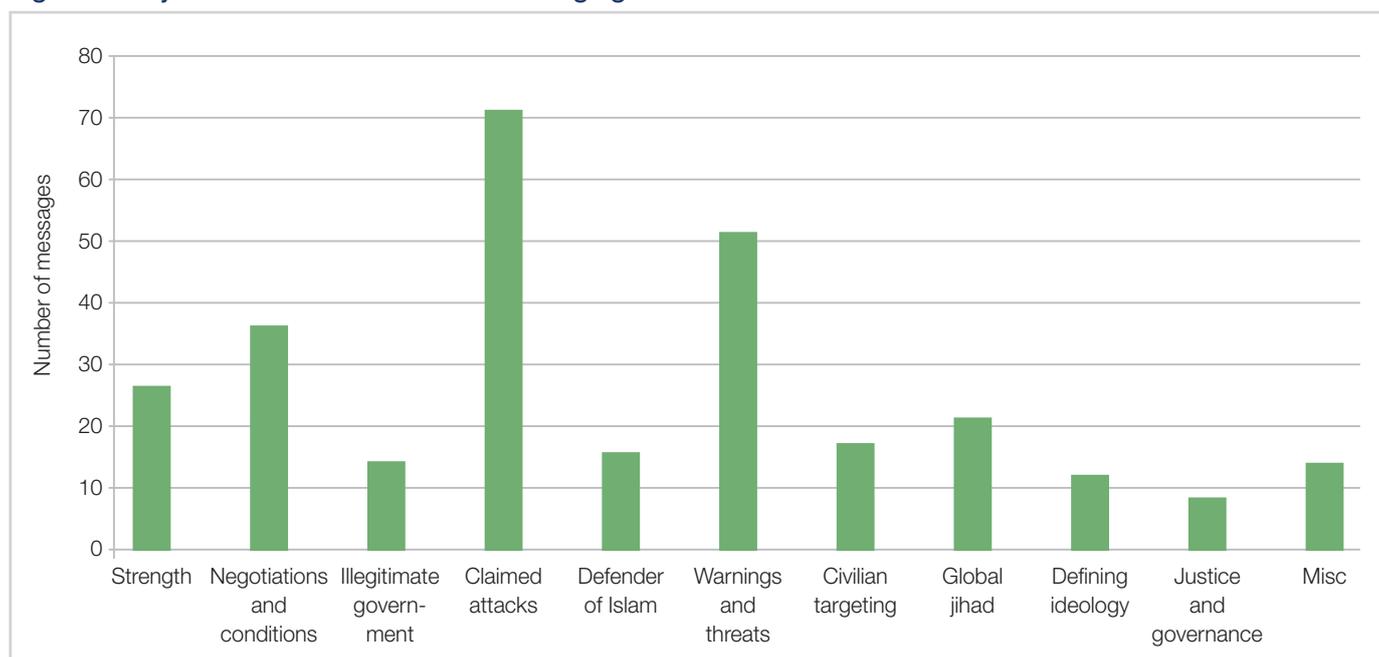
Qualitative review of content themes

Some recurring themes frequently appear in Boko Haram messaging, although the narratives of many have shifted over time in response to evolving conditions. Each publication in the dataset was coded based on the question, ‘What is the main purpose of this message?’ This resulted in 11 common messaging themes across the 145 publications, with some items containing more than one major theme (theme definitions can be found in Appendix A).

50%

THE PERCENTAGE OF MESSAGES THAT CONTAINED CLAIMED ATTACKS OR STRENGTH AS MAJOR THEMES IN 2016

Figure 6: Major themes in Boko Haram messaging



Claiming an attack

The most frequent reason for a Boko Haram message has been to claim an attack, and increase awareness of its activities along that front. In each year since 2011, attack claims have featured in approximately half of all Boko Haram messaging.²¹ The only exception was 2015, when it comprised just 29% of messaging, but this also coincided with a period when Boko Haram had reached the height of its territorial conquests and was instead steadily losing ground.

Table 1: Percentage of messages that contained major themes, by year

Year/themes	Claimed attacks	Strength	Negotiations and conditions	Illegitimate government	Defender of Islam	Warnings and threats	Civilian targeting	Global jihad	Defining ideology	Justice and governance	Miscellaneous
2010	20%	20%	0%	20%	20%	0%	0%	60%	20%	0%	0%
2011	50%	7%	37%	13%	13%	37%	10%	13%	3%	0%	7%
2012	57%	6%	32%	11%	19%	51%	21%	4%	11%	0%	19%
2013	61%	44%	44%	0%	6%	33%	11%	22%	6%	0%	6%
2014	54%	8%	15%	23%	15%	31%	8%	31%	0%	38%	0%
2015	29%	36%	4%	4%	0%	21%	7%	14%	14%	14%	4%
2016	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	25%

Warnings, threats and the expansion of violence

Boko Haram has often claimed attacks while issuing future warnings and threats (the second most prominent theme, appearing in more than one-third of its messaging). The usual targets appear frequently in Boko Haram messaging, such as an August 2012 statement from Qaqa in which he threatened to continue ‘killing politicians, security personnel, Christians, and anybody who assists security men to arrest us’.²² Over time various other groups have been added to this list or emphasised in messaging, including other Muslim groups viewed as ‘pagans’ for holding different beliefs, such as the Izala Society, Shiites and the Tijaniyya and Qadriyya Sufi brotherhoods. This demonstrates Boko Haram’s exclusive outlook.²³

Such warnings and threats to new target groups also serve to give notice to opponents prior to the initiation of violent operations. This process was described by Qaqa as an opportunity for innocent civilians to protect themselves, by avoiding association or proximity with the aforementioned groups.²⁴ In this sense, Boko Haram has often signalled the directions it will take through its messaging, especially when it comes to an expansion of violence.

Given the proliferation of warnings in Boko Haram messaging it can be difficult to discern between a legitimate threat and bluster

For example, in February 2012 Qaqa expressed his displeasure with cell phone providers for their supposed help in the arrests of group members.²⁵ This threat resulted in a campaign of attacks on cell phone masts across northern Nigeria beginning September 2012, which he confirmed was related to the issue of providers ‘releasing information about our activities’.²⁶

Given the proliferation of warnings in Boko Haram messaging, especially during Shekau’s extended rants in which he accuses essentially all opposed to him, it can be difficult to discern between a legitimate threat and bluster. But a careful reading of the situation may determine what Boko Haram’s next target could be, which is more likely to result in action when linked to a specific and articulated grievance.

Schools

Public threats to schools emerged ahead of a campaign in which classrooms were burnt down in retaliation for the supposed mistreatment of *almajiri* students and teachers (part of the traditional *Tsangaya* Islamic schooling system). In a 26 January 2012 message Shekau complained about this alleged mistreatment and threatened to launch attacks.²⁷ At around the same time Qaqa stated that if security forces destroyed Quranic schools, ‘you have primary schools as well ... and we will start bombing them’, signifying both a convergence in messaging and a preoccupation with this issue at the time.²⁸



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As with the attacks on cell phone masts, this campaign began via public warnings rooted in a specific grievance linked to perceptions of mistreatment, before morphing into outright violence. Interestingly, the campaign to burn down schools was initially designed to avoid civilian casualties, before the attacks intensified to include students as victims. Explaining this approach, Qaqa stated in February 2012, 'We attacked the schools at night because we don't want to kill pupils ... we would attack the public school in daylight if any Tsangaya school is attacked again,' revealing the pathway to escalation.²⁹

The media

This approach helps explain the attacks on the media. Despite its reliance on the media to get its message out, Boko Haram has had a contentious relationship with Nigerian media actors, with Qaqa consistently complaining that the media has misrepresented the group or reported false stories. In April 2012 Boko Haram bombed the offices of *This Day* newspaper in both Kaduna and Abuja in a coordinated attack. The violence was explained in reference to Boko Haram's issues with the media, while *This Day* in particular was targeted due to its central role in a previous controversy.³⁰ Boko Haram divided media outlets into three tiers – based on the level of perceived transgression – during a video message showcasing the attack in early May 2012.³¹ In June 2012 Qaqa went on to warn, 'We are carefully watching what everyone is saying about us.'³²

While the rationale for the initial media attacks was apparent in Boko Haram's messages prior to and after the *This Day* attack, there have not been similar attacks against media outlets since. Messaging critical of media coverage largely declined after Qaqa's tenure as spokesperson ended, demonstrating potentially both a limit to the group's violent reach and how the threat of violence can recede as messaging focuses shift.

The oil sector

In early 2014 Shekau issued multiple messages that threatened attacks on Nigerian oil refineries.³³ Considered largely bombastic given Boko Haram's distance from the oil sector and the lack of violence attributed to Islamic extremism south of the state of Kogi, a female suicide bomber nonetheless attacked a refinery in Lagos in June 2014.³⁴ The incident was the second reported use of a

woman during a suicide operation, and the only officially claimed use of the tactic by Boko Haram, until a January 2017 audio message from Shekau.³⁵

The decision to attack the refinery was likely a more strategic strike at the Nigerian government's source of wealth rather than any specific grievance against the oil sector, and the incident was not followed up by repeated violence – perhaps due to the logistical difficulties of operating far from Boko Haram's core areas. Messaging against the oil sector has also rarely been repeated in the attack's aftermath. Nonetheless, rather than emerging out of nowhere, the assault was foreshadowed in Boko Haram messages in February, March and May that year, indicating its commitment and ability to follow through even on pledges considered to be unrealistic at the time.³⁶

Geographic expansion

The detention of group members has frequently emerged as a core grievance in the group's messaging, and figured prominently in its propaganda regarding geographic expansion. The first major example occurred prior to Boko Haram's 20 January 2012 attack on the city of Kano, when the group issued a number of public warnings directed at Kano's political and religious leaders, stating that the city would soon face its wrath due to the harassment of its members.³⁷ Spokesperson Abu Zaid had cautioned Kano in an open letter in July 2011 as well, and an initial release of some members in August that year may have temporarily appeased the group.³⁸

The campaign to burn down schools was initially designed to avoid civilian casualties – before the attacks intensified

Despite this release, Shekau reiterated the warning in a communiqué one month before the attacks, and attempted to provide a public rationale for the planned violence, so that 'when we launch attacks in the city ... they should not blame us'.³⁹ In messaging days after the incident, both Qaqa and Shekau again emphasised the link between the attack and the harassment of its members.⁴⁰

A similar dynamic occurred prior to Boko Haram's first operations in Sokoto, with Qaqa warning the city in January 2012 to unconditionally release all group members

or face attack.⁴¹ With this warning apparently unheeded, the group struck six months later on 30 July 2012, and Qaqa explained, ‘We attacked Sokoto because many of our brethren have been incarcerated there.’⁴²

These warnings echo a recurring pattern that also preceded the expansion of violence in Cameroon, with Boko Haram threatening that if its members did not remain free, there would be violent consequences.⁴³ This resulted in a difficult position, with speculation that Cameroon may have ignored Boko Haram’s presence on its territory prior to 2013 to avoid becoming a target.⁴⁴ The eventual expansion of violence into the country and the role Boko Haram’s ideology has played in indoctrinating a new cadre of militants in northern Cameroon indicate the short-term nature of this strategy.

Messaging related to specific grievances and the identification of responsible parties is a likely indicator of future Boko Haram targeting

At any rate, this expansion in geographic operations, similar to the expansion in target groups, has followed a distinct pattern in Boko Haram messaging, with repeated public warnings, tied to a specific grievance, prior to the onset of violent operations. Messaging related to specific grievances and the identification of responsible parties is thus a likely indicator of future Boko Haram targeting.

Negotiations and conditions

Surprisingly, the third most frequent theme surfacing in Boko Haram messaging has dealt with negotiations or conditions for dialogue, encompassing a quarter of its total publications. This has taken a number of different avenues, with Shekau often denying that his group has engaged the federal government for the purposes of dialogue. The frequency with which Shekau has felt compelled to deny government discussions may reveal potential sensitivities regarding the hypocrisy of associating with an entity frequently derided as illegitimate.

Nonetheless, during the first phase of messaging Qaqa admitted that the group had attempted negotiations on two occasions. In the first, Boko Haram reportedly sent its Head of Enlightenment, Abu Dardaa, only for him to be arrested.⁴⁵ A statement signed by Shekau on 7 February 2012 complained about this turn of events, and explained that the group had conducted a subsequent attack ‘to teach the government a lesson because they deceived us to believe in their dialogue proposal, yet they kept arresting our members’.⁴⁶

Despite vowing not to trust the government, the group claimed a second attempt in March 2012 under the auspices of respected Islamic leader Dr Ibrahim Datti, with contact reportedly made through Salkida.⁴⁷ That attempt ultimately floundered when details of the discussions were leaked to the



THE THIRD MOST FREQUENT THEME SURFACING IN BOKO HARAM MESSAGING DEALS WITH NEGOTIATIONS OR CONDITIONS FOR DIALOGUE

press.⁴⁸ Qaqa explained this betrayal afterwards on 20 March 2012, stating, ‘We will never respect any proposal for dialogue.’⁴⁹ In April 2012 Shekau added that ‘there are particular times in which Allah allows us to negotiate with non-Muslims and there are times when Allah says not to do so’, indicating that the time for negotiation had passed.⁵⁰

Thereafter the group consistently denied rumours of negotiations, with 44% of messages in 2013 referencing this theme. The emergence of a number of purported spokespersons who declared ceasefires and negotiations on behalf of the group in late 2012–early 2013 compounded matters, with Shekau likely feeling the need to disassociate his group from these false claims and preserve the legitimacy of his anti-government struggle.⁵¹

With Boko Haram moving to establish Islamic rule in the rural areas of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states, and admission into the Islamic State thereafter, this theme did not figure prominently in messaging again, surfacing in just 15% of releases in 2014 and 4% in 2015. While it is unclear what Boko Haram would have discussed, or if it would have been willing to moderate its conditions (see below), the admitted considerations of a government dialogue represented an opportunity to get group members to the table early in the movement’s development rather than allowing them to continue to lurk in the shadows. This opportunity was ultimately eliminated by perceptions of government insincerity.

Tangible demands

During the group’s resurgence in 2010 and 2011, certain spokespersons put forth some demands that could serve as points of discussion, such as the ejection of then Borno state Governor Ali Modu Sheriff from office, the restoration of the mosque where Muhammad Yusuf had preached, and the removal of troops from the streets of Maiduguri.⁵²

While those demands were not frequently repeated, other conditions have been fairly consistent over time. Specifically, the demand for all incarcerated Boko Haram members to be set free has been a recurrent refrain in messaging. This featured in Qaqa’s press briefs, and continued up until more recent statements from Shekau calling for the exchange of the kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls for detained group members.⁵³

Forcibly releasing group members from prison has been a prominent feature of the Boko Haram struggle, demonstrating that the welfare of its members has been a clear preoccupation, figuring prominently in both messaging and action.

This preoccupation has extended to the wives and children of detained members, with Shekau referencing this theme at least seven times in 2012 and 2013. Frequently accusing the federal government of ‘kidnapping’ the families of members, Shekau complained in a January 2012 message that this ‘is wrong’ and that ‘even in a time of war, women are exempt’.⁵⁴ Qaqa took this a step further in March 2012, stating, ‘We would soon start kidnapping the wives and children of all the people that have had hands in the arrest of our wives and children.’⁵⁵ In fact, the group took specific action along this front thereafter, with Shekau revealing in a May 2013 video for the first time that his group was holding local hostages, ‘since we don’t get our children and wives’.⁵⁶ The abduction of a French family in northern Cameroon in February 2013, Boko Haram’s first foreign national kidnapping, was also linked to the freedom of women and children detained in both Nigeria and Cameroon.⁵⁷

Forcibly releasing group members from prison has been a prominent feature of the Boko Haram struggle

This issue clearly touches a nerve, and has presumably spurred action in response. Shekau specifically complained about the seizure of eight women and 14 children from a house in Damaturu in May 2013, likely a personal reference to the detention of his family during a September 2012 incident in which he narrowly escaped arrest.⁵⁸ Shekau’s wife Hassana Yakubu and three children were released from custody in June 2013, and the repeated refrains condemning the detention of women and children largely dissipated afterwards.⁵⁹

This demonstrates the personalised nature of Boko Haram messaging at times, as well as how failure to meet the group’s demands can spur a destructive reaction. While it is unlikely that Boko Haram would have refrained from abducting large groups of local citizens from 2013

onwards, the first publicly acknowledged incident was justified as being in response to this specific issue.⁶⁰

There have been negotiations over the release of Boko Haram members and their families. Shekau complained during a May 2014 video that some detained group members 'have not seen their families in five years'.⁶¹ This is clearly a sore point for the group. While Boko Haram's credibility as a negotiating partner has been damaged by reports that several near-releases of the Chibok schoolgirls were stymied owing to last-minute changes in its demands, the eventual release of 21 girls in October 2016 indicates the group's determination in this realm.⁶² In this sense, the desire to secure the release of group members and their families matches the frequency in which they appear in group messaging, and could serve as a leverage point on the part of the Nigerian government in future discussions.

Intangible demands

The other consistent demand present throughout Boko Haram messaging is less tangible, but relates to the full implementation of sharia law, as well as the suspension of the Nigerian constitution and the democratic process. While the group had stated at various times that this project would only apply to northern Nigeria, it quickly evolved to include all of Nigeria, with later aspirations at a regional and even global level.⁶³ Shekau has frequently complained about both the Nigerian constitution and democracy in general

Reacting to a shifting environment

At times, Boko Haram appeared to be reacting as it went along, rather than taking a solid position. For example, a video featuring an anonymous gunman following the kidnapping of the French family in February 2013 criticised France for conducting a war on Islam, a signal of an increasingly international outlook.⁶⁴ A month later, Shekau appeared in a video that also showed the French family but made no mention of France's war on Islam, instead referencing some specific local issues, such as threatening Joint Task Force spokesperson Sagir Musa in Maiduguri.⁶⁵

In another example, Shekau complained about girls' attending university in a 24 March 2014 message. He stated, 'University is forbidden, girls you should return to your homes. In Islam, it is allowed to take infidel women as slaves and in due course we will start taking women away and sell them in the market.'⁶⁶ This statement

foreshadowed the infamous 14 April 2014 abduction of over 200 schoolgirls from Chibok. Shekau's first message on the situation in early May (three weeks after the abduction had taken place and a global social media campaign had emerged) continued his threat to 'sell these girls in the marketplace', demonstrating continuity pre- and post-incident.⁶⁷

Nonetheless in a second video a week later, Shekau appeared a bit less unreasonable, perhaps realising the degree of leverage due to the global outrage. In between outlandish statements he demanded the release of group members in exchange for the girls, an offer not made in the first video.⁶⁸ These shifting positions demonstrate how Boko Haram has at times moderated its approach in response to evolving conditions and changes in its operating environment, especially during the group's early forays into kidnapping.

as being representations of manmade provisions taking precedence over the word of God. This is a standard talking point in many of his video releases, and has been a persistent grievance since the earliest statements of the group. Dardaa proclaimed in May 2011 that ‘we do not believe in the Nigerian Constitution, and secondly we do not believe in democracy, but only in the laws of Allah’.⁶⁹ This illustrates the other side of negotiations with Boko Haram, and indicates why such discussions are likely to flounder, given that the expressed demands and world vision are incompatible with contemporary realities.

Defender of Islam and the war on Christianity

A core Boko Haram grievance has been the perceived mistreatment of Muslims in Nigeria, with the movement outlining a history of injustice that began with the appearance in Nigeria of the United Kingdom (its colonial power) and the subsequent dismantling of Usman dan Fodio’s Sokoto Caliphate. The resulting ‘illegitimate’ post-colonial state has been viewed as complicit with the Christian community in perpetrating abuses, leading to the need for Muslims to defend themselves.

Religious tensions in Nigeria exploded into violence on a number of occasions prior to Boko Haram’s emergence, primarily in the mixed ‘Middle Belt’ region of the country. Boko Haram attempted to insert itself into this dynamic, particularly during an expansionary phase in 2011–12, by building on an anti-Christian rhetoric present since the movement’s founding under Yusuf. Messaging from Yusuf, Shekau and, to a lesser extent, Qaqa referred to episodes of sectarian violence in areas of Nigeria such as Zangon Kataf, Langtang, Shendam and Jos, in an attempt to galvanise support and provide evidence of a pattern of abuses perpetrated against Muslims.

In this sense, Shekau appeared to be positioning his group as defending Muslims in Nigeria in lieu of a government that would not. For example, on 1 January 2012 Qaqa complained that ‘the President has never visited any of the theatres where Muslims were massacred ... the disposition and body language of the President clearly showed that he is the leader of Christians’.⁷⁰ Shekau followed a few days later, commenting, ‘We are also at war with Christians because the whole world knows what they did to us ... they kill us, they burn our houses, they burn our mosques.’⁷¹

This focus on creating a division between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria was accentuated when Qaqa issued an ultimatum to all southerners (and by association presumed Christians) to leave the northern part of the country within three days, in January 2012.⁷² Boko Haram tried to increase this divide by demanding that all true Muslims isolate themselves from Christians, a point Shekau has continually emphasised in his broadcasts. On 4 August 2012 Shekau said, ‘Unity will not be achieved, there is nowhere that Allah said a Muslim should unite with a Christian.’⁷³ This period coincided with a campaign of suicide attacks on churches in Nigeria during Sunday services, another indication of the convergence between messaging and violent action.⁷⁴

A core Boko Haram grievance has been the perceived mistreatment of Muslims in Nigeria

While anti-Christian sentiment remained an aspect of Boko Haram rhetoric, the references to specific Middle Belt events began to dry up by early 2014, with little mention since a May 2014 video by Shekau. It seems likely that its failed attempt to spark a religious war and appeal to Muslims throughout Nigeria caused the group to shift its strategy by 2014, and violent actions targeting Christians also declined. The decisions to hold territory in mid-2014, initiate regular cross-border operations in the Lake Chad Basin region, and ultimately join the Islamic State, likely distracted Boko Haram from this initial anti-Christian agenda. Consequently, propaganda with anti-Christian sentiments and/or presenting Boko Haram as the defender of Muslims in Nigeria declined from appearing in 19% of all messaging in 2012 to not making a single appearance in 2015. This is a stunning reversal, and an indication that, along with diminishing action in this regard, it is not considered a priority broadcast theme anymore.⁷⁵

Local, regional or international focus

Early on Boko Haram stressed that its struggle primarily lay within Nigeria, often defining itself as a group that ‘is waging jihad in the country called Nigeria’.⁷⁶ Many messages prior to the Islamic State phase were directed at then president Goodluck Jonathan, while

Shekau at times called for brethren from Yobe to Kaduna to Lagos to support his cause.⁷⁷

This Nigeria-centric focus was further emphasised through commentary on specific issues. Some of Qaqa's statements referenced seemingly minor and localised developments, such as threatening prominent Maiduguri lawyer Aisha Wakil over missing money, opposing a death sentence issued against Major Hamzat Al-Mustapha for his role in the murder of the wife of a former Nigerian presidential candidate, or complaining about a proposed law to regulate religious organisations in Katsina state.⁷⁸

Boko Haram's regionalisation manifested itself in regular operations in Cameroon in March 2014, demonstrating the spread of the group's presence and its violent struggle

While the Nigerian aspect remained a point of emphasis in the group's messaging, a more regional focus began to emerge in early 2013. In February that year, Boko Haram militants kidnapped seven members of the Moulin-Fournier family, the first operation to occur within Cameroon's borders. The group claimed this kidnapping had been conducted in response to the arrest of group members in Cameroon, a point emphasised in messaging when the head of the family was forced to read a statement stating, 'They [Boko Haram] don't want to enter [into] conflict with Cameroon, however, if you arrest their men again ... they will multiply kidnapping and suicide bombing operations more in Cameroon than Nigeria.'⁷⁹ The threat to Cameroon, along with some messaging directed at France, the family's country of origin, was one of the first major instances of messaging directed outside of Nigeria's borders.

This gradually increasing regionalisation manifested itself in the initiation of regular operations in Cameroon in March 2014, demonstrating the spread of both the group's presence and its violent struggle. It also surfaced in group messaging, as in a video statement in January 2015 in which Shekau specifically addressed Cameroonian President Paul Biya, making similar ideological demands as those he often directs at Nigeria, regarding the suspension of the Cameroonian constitution and the need to 'embrace Islam'.⁸⁰ Shekau closed that statement by referring to himself as the group's imam 'in some African nations, especially Nigeria', confirming the regional focus, but also the predominant role Nigeria still played in this struggle.⁸¹

In a different video message around the same time, Shekau taunted Nigerian President Mahamadou Issoufou and Chadian President Idriss Déby.⁸² This coincided with the first violent Boko Haram operations in both countries in February 2015, again demonstrating the close convergence between messaging and group action, and confirming the extension of its struggle to the Lake Chad region.

2013

THE YEAR BOKO HARAM MILITANTS KIDNAPPED SEVEN MEMBERS OF THE MOULIN-FOURNIER FAMILY, THE FIRST OPERATION TO OCCUR WITHIN CAMEROON'S BORDERS

International jihad and external influence

Linked to the debate around Boko Haram's geographic focus and the extent to which it is preoccupied with local concerns, is its connection to external groups, often tied to a desire to strike at Western targets. The suicide car bomb attack at the United Nations (UN) headquarters in August 2011 appeared to herald a shift towards a more international outlook fuelled by external jihadist connections, but was not followed by similar action. Nonetheless, the debate over such connections continued, with a particular focus on how much influence these organisations may have in convincing the group to expand its horizons.

Boko Haram members expressed a fondness for organisations such as al-Qaeda, and directly threatened the United States (US) in messaging, in as early as 2010. In a March 2010 interview, spokesperson Musa Tanko stated, 'Islam doesn't recognise international boundaries ... the United States is the number one target for its oppression and aggression against Muslim nations.' Tanko went on to glorify al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and Taliban emir Mullah Umar, while asserting that his group would attack the US if possible, but remained focused on Nigeria for now.⁸³

Shekau, in his first messages in 2010 and 2011, had a similar approach, paying tribute to jihadist leaders in Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan and Chechnya in an October 2010 broadcast, and telling the US to 'die with your fury' in July 2011.⁸⁴ Both messages were in Arabic, while one was disseminated on a jihadist forum and the other by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's messaging wing, a clear indication of external outreach at a time when the group was attempting to reassert itself.

Boko Haram members expressed a fondness for organisations such as al-Qaeda, and directly threatened the United States in messaging as early as 2010

Nonetheless, this initial focus on the international jihadist movement ceased to be an important part of messaging for some time, before creeping back in. For example, in Shekau's first two video messages in January 2012, which were nearly 46 minutes long in total and played a significant role in establishing his status as the face of the movement, the Boko Haram leader did not threaten the US or greet external jihadist leaders, and only mentioned al-Qaeda in passing.⁸⁵ These messages were also primarily in Hausa and uploaded on YouTube, more common tactics indicative of a localised focus. Qaqa did boast of al-Qaeda links on occasion, but largely remained focused on local issues.

The external jihadist connection prominently resurfaced in November 2012, when Shekau released another message in Arabic through a jihadist forum, greeting his 'brothers' around the world. While the dissemination method and

February
2015

THE FIRST VIOLENT BOKO
HARAM OPERATIONS TAKE
PLACE IN NIGER AND CHAD

language usage proved to be an outlier, references to ‘brothers’ in various global jihadist hotspots and veiled threats against the leaders of Western nations were a regular part of Shekau’s discourse by mid-2013. In December 2013 Shekau said, ‘Tomorrow you will see us in America itself ... our operation is not confined to Nigeria.’⁸⁶ While a fanciful boast, it contributed to the emergence of a less restrictive lens in group messaging.

A new messaging wing representing Boko Haram, al-‘Urwah al-Wuthqa, emerged in early 2015, producing content similar to Islamic State productions

The beginning of 2015 saw the biggest changes in this regard. A January 2015 message from Shekau discussed the Charlie Hebdo attack in France, a rare piece of commentary on jihadist attacks in the West, while in another he spent a significant amount of time clarifying his group’s ideology after his ‘brethren in God [had] asked’, a possible reference to external actors.⁸⁷ The new messaging wing representing the group, al-‘Urwah al-Wuthqa, also emerged in early 2015, producing content similar to Islamic State productions (see call-out box). Arabic was frequently used, a Twitter account was set up, productions were of a much higher quality, and Shekau was often absent. This marked one of the most drastic modifications in both messaging style and content in the group’s history, and the rapid changes suggested considerable external influence.

This posturing culminated in Shekau’s pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State, officially subordinating his organisation to an external jihadist actor for the first time. Messaging under the resulting MOWAP continued to focus on greeting ‘brothers’ around the world, with an occasional reference to Western nations, but Shekau’s threats against specific Western leaders largely dissipated. In other respects it was fairly similar to the al-‘Urwah al-Wuthqa wing that preceded it, and continued to be of high professional quality.

MOWAP productions displayed a level of external influence in other aspects as well. An October 2015 video featured an older militant urging al-Shabaab members in Somalia to join the Islamic State, and came out two weeks after a similar campaign of videos appealing to al-Shabaab from other Islamic State provinces, demonstrating a level of external coordination. Other videos showed militants joining hands in a circle or implementing *huduud* punishments, mirroring messaging from other Islamic State *wilayats*.⁸⁸

Given the difficulty in uncovering concrete linkages between Boko Haram and external jihadist organisations, messaging has thus provided a window into its increasingly global focus. The revitalised emphasis on this aspect in 2013, and the creeping increase of such references, signalled Boko Haram’s growing global awareness. In some aspects, messaging can provide clues to orientation, and such shifts should be watched closely to see if they represent



A MAJOR ASPECT IN BOKO HARAM MESSAGING THROUGHOUT THE YEARS HAS BEEN THE TARGETING OF MUSLIM CIVILIANS

simply an increased desire for external outreach or an accompanying change in external relationships.⁸⁹

Civilian targeting

Another major aspect in Boko Haram messaging throughout the years has been the targeting of Muslim civilians – a persistent issue, but one that has taken on increased importance in the leadership dispute between Shekau and Abu Musab al-Barnawi. Boko Haram's response to this has largely been consistent, despite an escalation in overall violence involving civilians. This gives credence to Shekau's assertions after the August 2016 split that he had explained his ideology in full at the time of his pledge, and did not receive a negative response from the Islamic State.⁹⁰

As early as July 2011 Zaid stated, 'We as a group do not kill people who are innocent. If there are people who profess Islam and do not partake in government or Western education, their blood and wealth are sacred unless otherwise.'⁹¹ The key point here revolves around the definition of innocence and the group's ability to judge that, an aspect typical of Salafi-jihadist organisations. Simply being a Muslim is not enough, as Qaqa stated in January 2012 – 'even if you are a Muslim and do not abide by sharia, we will kill you'.⁹² Essentially, unless people accept Boko Haram's version of Islam and actively conduct themselves in the appropriate manner, they can be marked for death, a point that has been used to justify extreme episodes of violence.

Shekau elaborated on the definition of an unbeliever, stating in April 2014 that 'you cannot say you are a believer and then you go and follow democracy'. He later stated in the same message that Muslims who live with Christians and seek reconciliation also deserve death.⁹³ Equating any participation with the government or association with Christians with unbeliever status is an ideological point dating back to the preachings of Yusuf. It also explicitly became part of Shekau's typical messaging refrain, further isolating the space within which a true believer could operate.

This ability to conduct *takfir* (the process of declaring another Muslim a non-believer) was upheld in Shekau's January 2015 message outlining his ideology ahead of admission into the Islamic State. In that clip, Shekau emphasised that 'we do not engage in *takfir* against

any Muslim over a sin he did not commit', thus acknowledging that his group actively participates in this controversial practice, but never in error.⁹⁴ Shekau argued the same point based on his definition of innocence and guilt upon splitting from al-Barnawi – with the record demonstrating historical consistency. It also makes the group's persistent claim that it does not kill innocent people technically accurate, from its perspective, based on its judgement and self-assumed power to define someone's innocence or guilt.

Outside the parameters of this internal ideological debate, however, the group has faced significant public criticism for initiating attacks that result in Muslim casualties who may have been innocent even by Boko Haram's strict definitions. Boko Haram deflected blame early on, shifting the onus to security officials and attempting to exploit Nigeria's poor human rights record. After the January 2012 Kano attacks, which drew significant criticism and spurred the public emergence of the breakaway Ansaru movement, Shekau claimed, '[T]he police came ... and started killing innocent civilians and attributed the atrocities to us.'⁹⁵

Boko Haram has faced significant public criticism for initiating attacks that result in Muslim casualties

At other times, the group justified the death of those others might consider innocent, highlighting its fringe interpretation and acceptance of collateral damage. After the August 2011 UN headquarters bombing in Abuja, Qaqa admitted that a Nigerian national was among the dead, but stated, 'We have warned everyone to steer clear of such places.'⁹⁶ Following an attack on a market in Maiduguri in February 2012, Qaqa claimed some traders had worked with security officials to arrest group members, justifying the violence by stating, 'We have severally warned the public to desist from conspiring with security agents to thwart our course.'⁹⁷

Qaqa frequently issued warnings that innocent civilians should either avoid certain target areas or be considered at fault. On 17 May 2012 he explained the advance notice as that 'we [Boko Haram] don't want innocent people to be caught in the attacks ... we are not happy

innocent people are dying in our war ... we have reduced our attacks in the past few days to strategize' – evidence of the group's public relations issue in this realm. Nonetheless, Qaqa went on to warn those who are innocent to avoid security installations and government buildings, or they would 'only have themselves to blame, we have done our best by issuing this warning'.⁹⁸

While ideologically consistent in terms of attack justification, this conservative view of innocence was narrowly applied over time and combined with increasing brutality. This resulted in an extension of target groups, and gave rise to persistent accusations of indiscriminate violence.

Boko Haram's inability to reconcile its view of innocence with that of the general public has made it a major theme in messaging

Boko Haram thus struggles to promote its vision in a manner the public will accept, explaining the persistent need to address this topic (surfacing in 12% of total messages, and as much as 21% in 2012). Moreover, the emergence of anti-Boko Haram vigilantes – often referred to as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) – in mid-2013 further complicated matters, as Boko Haram began to target communities that hosted the organisation, viewing them as culpable in a conspiracy against it. Those living in such areas were thus indiscriminately killed, as the presumed association with anti-Boko Haram forces based on geographic proximity justified their murder. During a shocking video from December 2014 that showed militants shooting nearly 100 men in what appeared to be a school hostel, one speaker explained, '[T]he people of Bama, who we have killed, now may call themselves Muslims, but we see them under the category of infidels,' highlighting the gap in perception between Boko Haram and the local populace.⁹⁹

There has been some hypocrisy in Boko Haram messaging on this subject. In a July 2014 video message Shekau stated, 'Our religion does not permit us to touch small children and women, we don't kill children,' which contradicts recent evidence regarding the deployment of young female suicide bombers.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Shekau made it clear that when it came to killing those who worked against the movement, he was even willing to bypass Quranic dictates. In an August 2012 message he said, 'We will not go after the people of the public unless of course they kill us or help arrest us. This includes women ... a woman, who Allah forbids from being killed, well I am here to tell you, we will cut you!'¹⁰¹

This subject became an issue in messaging in the lead-up to the Islamic State period, not least for the group's presentation to the outside world prior to its admission as a province. In his first interview as group spokesperson in January 2015, al-Barnawi deflected claims of civilian abuse after being prompted by the interviewer.¹⁰² This was followed by another message from fighter Abu Aysha the next day, in which he stated, 'Make the world all over



BOKO HARAM HAS STRUGGLED TO PROMOTE ITS VISION IN A WAY THAT THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDS

Islamic State statements

Starting with its first social media message regarding attacks conducted by Wilayat Gharb Afriqiyah on 8 July 2015, the Islamic State's messaging wings claimed at least 30 different attacks in its West Africa Province by February 2017. These have come in the form of short written statements distributed through Telegram and Twitter, a modern-day replacement of Qaqa's frequent press briefs. The promoted attacks have contained some common elements, representing assaults conducted by male suicide bombers or gunmen, and targeting either security forces, government institutions, vigilante members or Shiites – all viewed as acceptable and non-civilian targets.

A total of 21 of the 30 incidents (70%) have occurred since June 2016, all of which targeted security actors – an indication of the resumed

attention the Islamic State paid to Wilayat Gharb Afriqiyah in the run-up to and in the aftermath of al-Barnawi's appointment as leader.

Given the lack of a true spokesperson and Shekau's quiescence during the Islamic State messaging period, Boko Haram largely stopped claiming attacks but rather outsourced this aspect to Islamic State channels, further demonstrating the external influence in messaging patterns. The selective type of violence Islamic State media outlets chose to promote, ignoring the more widespread attacks by female suicide bombers or targeting of civilian soft targets, also potentially revealed a preference for the type of operations the Islamic State expected the West Africa Province to focus on, perhaps highlighting additional motivation to move on from Shekau and his more indiscriminate attack profile.

understand that we are not here to just kill innocent people.'¹⁰³ Nonetheless, this continued to be an issue under Shekau's rule, to the point where in the *al-Naba* interview announcing his ascension to *wali* (governor), al-Barnawi again addressed the issue of Muslim targeting, and promised his group would not attack 'markets and mosques'.¹⁰⁴

Boko Haram's inability to reconcile its view of innocence with that of the general public, and the increasingly brutal manner in which it pursues this dynamic, has made it a major theme in messaging, with the group seeking to defend its point of view while struggling in the public relations battle.

New MOWAP themes

The 13 videos produced by MOWAP after Boko Haram's admission into the Islamic State were markedly different from Shekau's previous messages. Short and direct, they exhibited high production values and often involved new members of the group unmasked on camera, diminishing Shekau's position as the public face of the group. More visually focused, these messages contained less dialogue than previously, but two major themes were present.

The first is the presentation of claimed attacks in a much more visual manner. A common pattern emerged in which video of the incidents was spliced together and overlaid by a *nasheed*. This was followed by indications of the 'successful' aftermath, marked by the bodies of dead soldiers and large



THE 13 VIDEOS PRODUCED BY MOWAP AFTER BOKO HARAM'S ADMISSION INTO THE ISLAMIC STATE WERE MARKEDLY DIFFERENT FROM SHEKAU'S PREVIOUS MESSAGES

amounts of weapons, ammunition, and vehicles seized as spoils. Seven of the videos followed this pattern, with many not even featuring a speaker. Denying government narratives of success against Boko Haram during this period of retrenchment was also a key part of this overall show of strength. In this sense, an important aspect of MOWAP productions was to focus on the operational capabilities of the group, and demonstrate its strength in contrast to that of regional security forces.

Another emerging theme concerned justice and governance. A few Boko Haram videos featured this aspect in late 2014, when the group began holding territory and controlling populations for the first time. MOWAP continued this focus, filming scenes of the public justice inflicted on those who had violated the *huduud* stipulations, or showing off the large numbers of people under the group's control during Eid prayers. Interviewed members also gave short speeches about the benefits of living under Boko Haram rule.¹⁰⁵

Messaging provides Boko Haram with an opportunity to discount the government's narratives and delegitimise it as a ruling entity

These videos, which dominated production during the third phase of Boko Haram messaging, were likely designed to present Boko Haram in a different light – as a capable governing entity with a strong army – and move away from Shekau's longwinded statements as the main focus of public outreach. In this sense, the key themes in these messages reflected group priorities at a time when Boko Haram had ushered in a phase of territorial control and governance, further demonstrating the convergence between messaging and operational considerations.

Examining the impact of Boko Haram messaging

Although it is not always consistent, Boko Haram has ensured its narrative is publicly disseminated, which is revealing for a group that is extremely secretive in most other respects. It is difficult to determine the impact of this messaging in terms of achieving group goals and/or reaching intended audiences – but at a very basic level, messaging has been an important focus of the group's activities, indicating that Boko Haram finds it useful in some fashion.

Messaging goals

To assess the impact of Boko Haram messaging, its overall goals need to be taken into account. As with any other jihadist organisation, messaging is used to provide information that furthers group objectives in a manner complementary to other activities.¹⁰⁶ This is likely accomplished through a focus on a few key areas.

Recruitment is one of the biggest reasons to conduct messaging. While Boko Haram's calls for new recruits have not been as overt or as globally directed



FOR A GROUP THAT IS EXTREMELY SECRETIVE IN MOST RESPECTS, BOKO HARAM HAS TRIED TO ENSURE ITS NARRATIVE IS PUBLICLY DISSEMINATED

as those of organisations such as al-Shabaab or the Islamic State, Shekau and other Boko Haram leaders have constantly urged the local population to rise up against the government, fulfil their religious duty and participate in its struggle.¹⁰⁷ A 2014 study by the CLEEN Foundation, which surveyed youth in Borno state regarding perceptions of involvement in Boko Haram, found that 21% considered exposure to messaging as a major pathway into radicalisation, second only to the influence of independent preachers.¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, further field research is needed to get a better sense of these dynamics and the extent to which Boko Haram messaging continues to reach and influence intended populations.

Messaging also creates awareness about the group and its activities, which can similarly tie into recruitment. Messaging has sought to explain Boko Haram's ideology and goals, often discussing its applicability in reference to specific attacks or warnings to new target groups. Many messages have been a reaction to events concerning the group – an indication of its need to share its narrative. The sensitivity displayed when the group has felt that the media misrepresented its words is a further signal of the importance placed on this aspect.

Boko Haram leaders constantly urge the local population to rise up against the government and fulfil their religious duty

The themes present in messaging have also reinforced operational activity, demonstrating the linkages between the group's words and actions. The peak in anti-Christian references at the same time as the wave of attacks on churches in the Middle Belt region, or the focus on governance aspects during the period of territorial control, are clear examples of this dynamic.

Additionally, messaging provides Boko Haram with an opportunity to discount the government's narratives and delegitimise it as a ruling entity. This complements the stated objective of replacing governing structures with a system based on sharia law. The consistent refrains against the Nigerian constitution and democratic processes, in addition to claimed successful attacks on government targets, play into this overall objective.

Messaging may also be aimed at providing information to external groups or even internally within Boko Haram. Shifting messaging dynamics preceded deeper connections to the Islamic State, while some of Shekau's statements have been specifically directed at his followers, perhaps in an attempt to disseminate information and/or increase morale.

Messaging audience

Boko Haram's intended audience has likely shifted over time, especially with the modifications in dissemination techniques that have affected overall reach (see below). Nonetheless, the Muslim community in Nigeria, and later on in the region, typically has been the core target audience. Certain messages have been more specific about their intended audience, with various statements directed at the residents of particular cities or states, specific target groups, or Nigerian and other regional leaders. At other times messaging has been vague, for instance with statements directed at the entire world or 'all people'.¹⁰⁹

The choice of language can also allow some insight regarding the intended audience. The dominant use of Hausa early on ensured that messaging was consumed by a local or, at best, regional audience. The lack of Kanuri messaging was likely a strategic decision to extend outreach beyond a narrow base, and an admission of Hausa's predominance as a lingua franca, with many Kanuri speakers also familiar with the language.¹¹⁰ The increasing utilisation of Arabic, which at times even surpassed Hausa, has been an indication of Boko Haram's augmented desire for international exposure, broadcasting information about the group to new audiences.¹¹¹ This helped solidify connections with the Islamic State. However, given the lack of deeper ties or the major presence of Arabic-speaking militants fighting alongside Boko Haram, the effectiveness of this approach in terms of its impact in expanding audiences and/or recruitment streams is questionable. A side effect has been that while productions in Hausa typically generate attention in the local press and therefore amplify coverage, those primarily in Arabic do not receive as much coverage given the language barrier, hindering local outreach.¹¹²

Boko Haram's intended audience has changed over time, with its geographic reach increasing. This has seen

overlapping considerations at a localised, national, regional and international level. Nonetheless, core groups have likely been augmented by an expanded audience rather than supplanted, given the continued use of Hausa and references to local Nigerian dynamics, even in the later stages of messaging.

Technology and expanded access

The reach of Boko Haram messaging has been expanded through the increased use of the Internet and social media, further extending its overall audience.

From Boko Haram's resurgence in 2010 to the current day, Internet access in Nigeria has expanded rapidly. Usage reportedly tripled between 2012 and 2015, in large part due to the extension of mobile technology, rising to an estimated penetration rate of 46% of the population by 2016.¹¹³ While the northern part of the country likely lags behind the economically-advanced south, this rise has coincided with Boko Haram's increased reliance on the Internet to distribute its messages, with all 28 of its messages in 2015 surfacing on YouTube and Twitter, compared to just six of 47 (13%) in 2012. This ability to spread propaganda via the Internet may also have diminished the need for a spokesperson who regularly briefed the press, contributing to the lack of a true replacement for Qaqa.

Increased Internet access has allowed Boko Haram to extend the range of those who can receive its messaging. Fliers and local-level preaching generally have a restricted geographic spread, and while the short press statements carried by Nigerian newspapers ensured the group's voice was heard across the country, the indirect nature of this gave away control of the narrative while imposing limits on content, especially visually.

The reliance on the Internet as a distribution mechanism has some drawbacks locally, given the limited Internet access in rural areas

Furthermore, the major Nigerian newspapers that have covered Boko Haram messaging, such as *Vanguard*, *Premium Times*, *Punch* and *Daily Trust*, are largely based in either Abuja or Lagos. Distribution occurs in the northern part of the country – for example, *Vanguard* circulates 7 500 copies out of 120 000 daily papers in the north-east – while others such as *Daily Trust* have been lauded for their reporting focus on the north-east, and particularly on the Boko Haram conflict.¹¹⁴ Relying on such outlets as a means to distribute messaging faces additional concerns regarding circulation, not to mention literacy, potentially limiting outreach to intended audiences.¹¹⁵

In contrast, improved Internet access and mobile phone technology has allowed videos to be directly downloaded, viewed and easily shared. Certain clips have generated extremely high viewer counts, such as the



INCREASED INTERNET ACCESS HAS ALLOWED BOKO HARAM TO EXTEND THE RANGE OF THOSE WHO CAN RECEIVE ITS MESSAGING

5 May 2014 clip in which Shekau claimed the Chibok schoolgirls' kidnapping. A copy of that clip uploaded by SaharaTV (the YouTube channel of the news website *Sahara Reporters*) generated nearly 500 000 views within a month.¹¹⁶ A large portion of this was likely driven by traffic external to Nigeria, especially given the English translation added by *Sahara Reporters* and global interest in the topic. Nevertheless, such dynamics indicate the possibilities of a more globalised audience.

The reliance on the Internet as a distribution mechanism has some drawbacks locally, however, given the limited Internet access in rural areas. Additionally, in the securitised environment following Boko Haram's resurgence in northern Nigeria, being caught with video messages by Shekau or even old sermons by Muhammad Yusuf could lead to abuse by security or vigilante forces, due to suspicions of the carrier's being a Boko Haram sympathiser; or even member.¹¹⁷ This has likely had a deterrent effect on the sharing, at least openly, of Boko Haram messages.

Being caught with video messages by Shekau could lead to abuse by security or vigilante forces

Yet messages are still downloaded and circulated offline in a discreet manner. Local journalists remarked that, despite a decline in popularity, such dynamics endure today, with many consuming Boko Haram propaganda less because of an ideological affinity than out of curiosity, because 'what they say affects us'.¹¹⁸ This ensures a continued local audience reachable via the Internet, but may mean less in terms of its utility as a recruiting tool, or in achieving other group objectives.

Implications and takeaways

In short, Boko Haram messaging has sought to complement overall group objectives, while its audience has expanded over time. A few key implications can be drawn from this review of Boko Haram messaging, with the most pertinent perhaps being the need for further research regarding its impact. In particular, the question as to whether messaging plays a role in contemporary recruitment should be explored.

Boko Haram sensitivities

Boko Haram has demonstrated some clear soft spots in its messaging. Sensitivity to the targeting of Muslim civilians and the prospect of engaging in government dialogue has spurred repeated denials, aspects of which could be used to counter the group's influence.

In addition, despite its pursuit of intangible demands, Boko Haram has also signalled a strong desire to secure the release of detained group members and their families. While any such manoeuvres must be balanced with the projected impact on national security, this common refrain, combined with previous deals involving foreign kidnap victims, demonstrates its willingness to consider certain concessions in pursuit of this objective. While this has not gone (or is likely to go) beyond the exchange of hostages, it is a potential avenue to at least open up a line of communication with aspects of the otherwise difficult-to-engage group.

Signalling

Messaging has also demonstrated a clear pattern in terms of expanded target groups and geographic areas, while outlining group grievances. Not all targets are warned beforehand, while at other times Shekau has essentially warned everyone he could think of, making it difficult to separate bluster from real threat. Nonetheless, future messaging should be watched closely for such aspects, especially when a target group is repeatedly tied to a specific grievance rather than a general distaste.

Boko Haram has signalled other strategic shifts through messaging as well. The decline in references to the Middle Belt region precipitated a more localised focus on north-east Nigeria. Dramatic shifts in messaging in the lead-up to its association with the Islamic State signalled this emerging relationship, just as messaging shifts in the months prior to the appointment of al-Barnawi in place of Shekau also foreshadowed this development. It is much easier in hindsight to point out patterns that led to a change, and the risk of getting carried away over minor aspects is real, but a close reading of messaging may help identify developing trends prior to their emergence.

Conclusion

Overall, Boko Haram messaging provides a window into a group that otherwise remains largely enigmatic and obscure. While serving a group aim by disseminating information about its activities and outlook, Boko Haram messaging has been fairly honest in some ways, despite a level of hypocrisy in other facets. Messaging can thus expose important insights beyond simply serving as a propaganda tool, and thus should be closely monitored.

Recommendations

1. Conduct further research on the impact of Boko Haram messaging on the local population. A particular focus should be the link between messaging and recruitment into Boko Haram. A better understanding of the resonance of messaging and its role as a recruitment tool will help enable more directed and effective programmes to reduce this influence.
2. Closely monitor and analyse messaging from Boko Haram in order to detect shifts that may signal wider changes, especially with reference to the current division of the movement into two core groups, or the identification of likely new target groups. Given the increasing international nature of extremist messaging, the predominant use of social media and the confluence of languages involved, a coordinated effort involving a range of expertise may be needed.

Boko Haram messaging provides a window into a group that otherwise remains largely enigmatic and obscure

3. Continue efforts to frustrate Boko Haram messaging, such as by detaining group media operatives or removing uploads from social media sites. While the latter risks pushing propaganda further underground and may not be the best strategy for all extremist groups, history suggests that Boko Haram has actually reduced messaging or discontinued certain practices when faced with such difficulties – such as its withdrawal from Twitter, or lengthy absences between video statements at times.
4. Reduce penalties against and/or the stigmatisation of those watching Boko Haram messaging that has been disseminated, in order to prevent such prohibitions from enhancing its appeal. If further research suggests curiosity is the main driver behind viewership, such practices should end. While avoiding the active spread of messaging, long-winded rants from Shekau may actually present his group as negative and volatile, producing the opposite effect to that intended.
5. Conduct press coverage of Boko Haram messages in a way that balances the reporting of facts with the need to limit its outreach and profit from multiplier effects. Careful reporting guidelines for future messages can help ensure the group is restricted in its ability to use the media as a vehicle to further its propaganda.



MESSAGING EXPOSES
IMPORTANT INSIGHTS
BEYOND SIMPLY SERVING AS
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Appendix A: Definition of themes

- **Strength** – some messages simply appear designed to demonstrate that the group is strong, capable and united. This likely ties into attempts at recruitment, in order to present Boko Haram as the winning entity. Recently, entire attack scenes have been filmed from start to finish as part of this aspect.
- **Negotiations and conditions** – many messages early on were preoccupied with either presenting the group's conditions or denying that it was negotiating with the government. The release of group members and complaints about security forces' detaining the wives and children of group members have been dominant aspects.
- **Illegitimate government** – many messages have complained about the government or, more often, specific representations of its system, such as the Nigerian constitution or democracy, often professing discontent with its man-made nature. Explanations of how working or being associated with the government is a sin are also included here.
- **Claimed attacks** – particularly when Boko Haram had a spokesperson, a number of messages simply claimed various attacks or denied government narratives regarding specific incidents. Often the group has felt compelled to explain the rationale behind various attacks as well, in order to justify them.
- **Defender of Islam** – the anti-Christian rhetoric, much of which has also referenced specific sectarian events in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, has combined with the presentation of Boko Haram as the defender of Nigeria's Muslims in this 'religious war'.
- **Warnings and threats** – Boko Haram has a (fairly accurate) history of publicly warning its targets prior to attack. This can range from an entire country (Cameroon) to a general group (telecommunications providers or Shias) to specific individuals (Aisha Wakil).
- **Civilian targeting** – after facing criticism during various phases, some messaging has refuted Boko Haram's responsibility for civilian deaths, or attempted to provide an ideological rationale.
- **Global jihad** – references to global jihadist actors or threats to Western nations have existed in Boko Haram messaging since the very beginning, but became a more standard part of rhetoric as time went by.
- **Defining Ideology** – on occasion, Boko Haram has felt compelled to explain its struggle and outlook in detail, and tie it into Nigeria's history as well – perhaps in an attempt to deflect blame for civilian abuses and/or increase recruitment.
- **Justice and governance** – especially during its period of territorial control, some messages depicted scenes of Boko Haram members dispensing justice to offenders of sharia law, or simply showed off their control in rural areas.
- **Miscellaneous** – a few messages do not neatly fit into one of the above categories. For example, some have denied Boko Haram's involvement in certain activities.

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- 23 Mohammed Lere, Boko Haram leader, Shekau, releases new video; vows to attack Emir Sanusi of Kano, *Premium Times*, 17 December 2014, <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/173429-boko-haram-leader-shekau-releases-new-video-vows-attack-emir-sanusi-kano.html>. In addition to a campaign targeting traditional leaders such as the Emir of Kano, Boko Haram has also assassinated well-known clerics, like prominent Salafist preacher Sheikh Muhammad Auwal Albani in February 2014, an indication of the extent to which it seeks to silence alternative and/or competing voices, ensuring the prominence of its own narratives.
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- 25 Yahaya Ibrahim, Boko Haram threaten to attack GSM providers, *Daily Trust*, 13 February 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201202140165.html>.
- 26 Hamza Idris, Why we attacked telecom facilities – Boko Haram, *Daily Trust*, 7 September 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201209070716.html>.
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- 29 Hamza Idris, Gunmen sack four Maiduguri schools, *Daily Trust*, 29 February 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201202290228.html>.
- 30 In 2002 the newspaper published an article by journalist Isioma Daniel on the divisive Miss World pageant scheduled for Nigeria, which many Muslims found offensive. Daniel's comments played a role in instigating clashes between religious communities in Kaduna, and the incident remains well known in Nigeria.
- 31 In the video, an unnamed narrator placed *This Day* newspaper by itself in the first category of already attacked media outlets because its 'offenses are big', due to its publishing a controversial editorial related to the 2002 beauty pageant in Nigeria, attributing the kidnapping of a British and Italian national killed in Sokoto state in March 2012 to Boko Haram despite its denials, misquoting a video by Shekau, and reporting that Qaqa had been arrested and/or killed. The second category of media outlets included *Punch*, *Daily Sun*, *Vanguard*, *Guardian*, *The Nation*, *Tribune*, *National Accord* and the radio station *Voice of America Hausa*. These outlets would be attacked soon, according to the narrator, although no violence specifically directed at them has since taken place. The third category encompassed outlets that would be attacked if not careful, distinguishing their level of perceived transgression as lower than those in category two, although the narrator did not provide specific details. These included *Leadership*, *Daily Trust*, *Peoples Daily*, the radio station *Radio France international* and the website *Sahara Reporters*. See University Press International, Boko Haram targets media in Nigeria, 2 May 2012, <http://www.upi.com/Boko-Haram-targets-media-in-Nigeria/86111335978602/>.
- 32 *Vanguard*, Bauchi church bombing: we did it, says Boko Haram, 4 June 2012, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/06/bauchi-church-bombing-we-did-it-says-boko-haram/>.
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- 38 Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, Governor Kwankwaso wants Boko Haram members released, *Leadership*, 31 August 2011.
- 39 *Agence France-Presse*, Nigerian Islamists threaten attacks on northern city, 17 December 2011.
- 40 *Sahara Reporters*, Boko Haram: why we struck Kano, 22 January 2012, <http://saharareporters.com/2012/01/22/boko-haram-why-we-struck-kano>.
- 41 Ndahi Marama, We'll attack Sokoto, Boko Haram warns sultan, Tambuwal, others, *Vanguard*, 29 January 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201201290054.html>.
- 42 *Sahara Reporters*, Boko Haram claims responsibility for attack on VP Sambo's home, 1 August 2012, <http://saharareporters.com/2012/08/01/boko-haram-claims-responsibility-attack-vp-sambo%E2%80%99s-home>.
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- 45 Hamza Idris, Boko Haram – we are open to dialogue, *Daily Trust*, 8 February 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201202080514.html>.
- 46 *The Nigerian Voice*, We did it, Sokoto is next – sect, 8 February 2012, <https://www.thenigerianvoice.com/news/82104/we-did-it-sokoto-is-next-sect.html>.
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- 54 Database of 145 statements collected by the author.

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- 66 Ola' Adu, Boko Haram: Shekau claims responsibility for attack on Giwa barracks, threatens to attack universities, Civilian-JTF, *Premium Times*, 24 March 2014, <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/157374-boko-haram-shekau-claims-responsibility-attack-giwa-barracks-threatens-attack-universities-civilian-jtf.html>.
- 67 Database of 145 statements collected by the author; Shekau also criticised his enemies for worshipping money rather than Allah during the video – while likely a reference to a bounty placed upon his head, comments like 'we don't need your money, your money is nothing to us', seemingly also ruled out the possibility of getting the girls back via ransom payments at the time. This message also ran 57 minutes, one of longest speeches Shekau has made, making it all the more curious that a swap for detained sect members, a common Boko Haram demand, did not appear in his script.
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- 73 Database of 145 statements collected by the author.
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- 78 Hamza Idris, Preaching law – Boko Haram warns Katsina, *Daily Trust*, 20 September 2011, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201109201228.html>; Hamza Idris, Boko Haram threatens female human right mediator, *Daily Trust*, 4 December 2011, <http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/sunday/index.php/news/9642-boko-haram-threatens-female-human-right-mediator>; *African Spotlight*, Boko Haram threatens to kill judges if Al-Mustapha is hanged, 31 January 2012, <http://africanspotlight.com/2012/01/31/nigeria-boko-haram-threatens-to-kill-judges-if-al-mustapha-is-hanged/>.
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- 84 *Reuters*, Nigerian sect leader praises al Qaeda, warns US, 14 July 2010, <http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFJ0E66D02020100714>; Jihadology, New message from the leader of Buku (Boko) Haram in Nigeria: 'Risalat Ta'aziyah', 12 July 2010, <http://jihadology.net/2010/07/12/new-message-from-the-leader-of-buku-boko-%E1%B8%A5aram-in-nigeria-risalat-taaziyah/>.
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- 89 The symbols used within messaging can also signify aspirational or emerging external links. For example, Boko Haram analyst Jacob Zenn noted in the lead-up to the March 2015 pledge that Boko Haram began to play the Islamic State *nasheed* 'My Ummah, dawn has arrived,' in its videos, in addition to prominently displaying the Black Standard flag (*rayat al-uqab*) also used by the Islamic State; Jacob Zenn, Boko Haram, Islamic State, and archipelago strategy, *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, 12:24, 2014.
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- 101 Database of 145 statements collected by the author.
- 102 Ola' Audu, The real reason we took Baga – Boko Haram, *Premium Times*, 28 January 2015, <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/more-news/175806-real-reason-took-baga-boko-haram.html>.
- 103 Database of 145 statements collected by the author.
- 104 Ibid.
- 105 After the August 2016 split, the Barnawi faction has continued to focus on governance and non-operational aspects of the movement. For example, a series of images from December 2016 depicted *hisbah* (Islamic morality police) entering a market in the Lake Chad region, proclaiming a verdict, and carrying out a punishment. Messaging from Shekau, on the other hand, has not included these themes. Given the al-Barnawi faction's continued ties to the Islamic State, particularly in the realm of messaging, and that organisation's emphasis on territorial control and governance, this is likely a further indication of external influence.
- 106 A review of Islamic State messaging from 2015–16 found that the main reasons the group engaged in this activity was to 'magnify the effects of its battlefield successes, minimise the consequences of its failures, recruit new adherents, and increase awareness of its ultimate goals'. A similar case can be made for Boko Haram's efforts. See Daniel Milton, Communication breakdown: unraveling the Islamic State's media efforts, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, October 2016, 48.
- 107 For example, al-Shabaab has specifically appealed to foreign recruits, including from Western nations, by publishing videos in various non-Somali languages, which often feature foreign fighters already present in the country calling for emigration. See Christopher Anzalone, Continuity and change: the evolution of al-Shabab's media insurgency 2006–2016, Hate Speech International, 2016.
- 108 CLEEN Foundation, Youth radicalization and affiliation with insurgent groups in northern Nigeria, 2014, 29–30.
- 109 Ndahi Marama and Hugo Odiogor, Boko Haram: we did not declare a ceasefire – Shekau, *Vanguard*, 4 March 2016, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/03/20-gunmen-killed-in-borno-army-barracks-attack-2/>.
- 110 Interestingly, in February 2017 Voice of America released a series of short clips stemming from 18-hours of previously unseen and unedited footage of Boko Haram members, seized from a militant's laptop during a military operation. The footage, likely from late 2014 and early 2015, provided a unique view into the day-to-day operations and activities of group members, compared to the edited and selective filming that makes its way into public messages. One key aspect was that members mainly spoke in Kanuri in normal settings during the clips, a further indication that the predominant usage of Hausa in official messaging has been a strategic and conscious decision; *Voice of America*, How VOA obtained secret Boko Haram videos, February 2017, <http://projects.voanews.com/boko-haram-terror-unmasked/how-this-story-was-reported/>; Telephonic interview with a local journalist based in Kano, 24 September 2016.
- 111 Telephonic interview with a local journalist based in Maiduguri, 25 October 2016.
- 112 Ibid.
- 113 Yomi Kazeem, There aren't as many Nigerian mobile Internet users as we thought, Quartz, <http://qz.com/658762/there-arent-as-many-nigerians-on-the-mobile-internet-as-we-thought/>; Internet Live Stats, Nigeria Internet users, <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/nigeria/>.
- 114 *Vanguard*, About us, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/about/>; John Campbell, Life in Nigeria's Maiduguri during the Boko Haram struggle, Africa in Transition blog, 22 September 2016, <http://blogs.cfr.org/campbell/2016/09/22/life-in-nigerias-maiduguri-during-the-boko-haram-struggle/>.
- 115 For example, a 2010 survey by Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics estimated the literacy rate in Borno state to be 14.5%, compared to 92% in Lagos. See UNESCO, High level round table on literacy – action plan: Nigeria, 7 September 2012, <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/Nigeria.pdf>. Interestingly, during a recent survey on the Kanuri-language radio station Dandal Kura based in Maiduguri, participants indicated that international news media are often accorded a higher level of trust than local Nigerian outlets – demonstrating additional issues in utilising Nigerian news outlets to promote messaging. ORB International, Dandal Kura evaluation, August 2016, 42.
- 116 *SaharaTV*, Boko Haram leader Shekau released video on abduction of Chibok girls, 5 May 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrfWS_vL0D4.
- 117 Telephonic interview with a local journalist based in Maiduguri, 25 October 2016; Telephonic interview with a local journalist based in Kano, 24 September 2016.
- 118 Telephonic interview with a local journalist based in Kano, 24 September 2016.

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