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Nigeria's 2015 Elections and the Boko Haram Crisis

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Summary

On January 25, 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Nigeria to stress the importance of the country's upcoming elections, and to extend condolences to the families of victims of recent attacks by the violent extremist group Boko Haram. Kerry also reiterated U.S. commitment to support counterterrorism efforts in Nigeria, a topic of particular congressional interest in the past year. The Secretary's visit highlights the extent of U.S. concern with current political and security challenges facing Nigeria, which is Africa's most populous country and largest economy, and which routinely ranks among the top African recipients of U.S. bilateral foreign aid.

The potential for violence around the February elections is high, given a close presidential race and widespread frustration in the north with the government's performance. Incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan faces a serious challenge from an opposition coalition that appears to have extensive support in northern Nigeria, and which seeks to draw support away from the ruling party in central and southern states. Pre-election assessments have raised concerns about the status of election preparations, and some have called for the polls to be delayed. By some accounts, violent protests in opposition areas could follow if Jonathan wins the election—allegations of fraud and rigging have plagued past elections, and a recent Gallup poll indicated that public confidence in the electoral process is extremely low. The opposition has raised particular concern with questions around the ability of those displaced by Boko Haram violence to vote, and concern that parts of the country may be deemed too insecure to hold elections. They contend that hundreds of thousands of Nigerians from the northeast states most-affected by Boko Haram could be disenfranchised. Whether Nigerian security forces, already strained by deployments to counter Boko Haram, can contain possible post-election violence is uncertain.

These political tensions, overlaid atop simmering communal and ethno-religious violence in parts of Nigeria, and alongside Boko Haram efforts to foment further instability, have raised concerns about the country's trajectory in the coming months. Nigeria also faces mounting economic pressures, and the government is struggling to balance competing budget demands amid a sharp drop in the global price of oil, a primary source of foreign exchange and government revenue.

Since attracting international headlines with the kidnapping of more than 270 schoolgirls in April 2014, Boko Haram has commenced a territorial offensive in the northeast that Nigerian security forces have struggled to reverse. Boko Haram attacks have remained largely concentrated in northeast Nigeria, but the group continues to periodically strike targets elsewhere in the country, and appears increasingly active in neighboring countries. By some estimates, more than 5,500 people were killed by the group in 2014, making Boko Haram one of the world's deadliest terrorist groups. Boko Haram raids and bombings in early 2015 have claimed hundreds of lives.

Boko Haram's actions have attracted increasing attention from Members of Congress in recent years, and the 2014 abductions and more recent attacks have spurred calls for new efforts to combat the group in various hearings, statements, and legislation, including H.Res. 46 and H.Res. 53 in the 114th Congress. The Obama Administration has increasingly sought to support a regional strategy to counter Boko Haram, amid apparent strains in the bilateral relationship over Nigeria's counterterrorism approach and its effectiveness. Nigeria and its neighbors have repeatedly committed to establishing a multinational force to fight Boko Haram, but cooperation among the countries has been limited. Recent signs of improved coordination among Nigeria's neighbors—Cameroon, Chad, and Niger—may offer new opportunities for the United States and other donors to enhance regional containment of the threat.

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Overview

Nigeria begins 2015 facing highly polarizing—and potentially destabilizing—elections amid a dangerous territorial advance in the northeast by the violent Islamist insurgent group Boko Haram.¹ By some estimates, more than 5,500 people were killed in Boko Haram attacks in 2014, and Boko Haram attacks have already claimed hundreds of lives in early 2015. In total, the group may have killed more than 10,000 people since its emergence in the early 2000s.² More than a million Nigerians have been displaced internally by the violence, and Nigerian refugee figures in neighboring countries continue to rise.³ U.S. officials have urged Nigeria to hold elections as scheduled, and to conduct them credibly. State Department officials have also suggested that the polls may be a factor in the increased tempo of Boko Haram attacks, as the group seeks to manipulate political sensitivities and undermine the credibility of the state as the elections approach.⁴ With public confidence in the electoral process reportedly low, there is significant concern that disputed election results could trigger violent protests. Potential political paralysis in the aftermath of contested elections could undermine the government's ability to bring post-election violence under control and further impede its ability to counter the Boko Haram threat.

The presidential elections scheduled for February 14 may be Nigeria's closest contest to date, with the field of serious candidates narrowed for the first time to the standard-bearers of two major political parties.⁵ The incumbent, President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the southern Niger Delta region, and his People's Democratic Party (PDP), which has been in power since the return to civilian rule in 1999, face a strong challenge from a new opposition alliance. That party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), draws support in part from popular disaffection with government performance in the predominately Muslim north and its response to Boko Haram. In December, the APC selected former military ruler Muhammadu Buhari, a northerner who challenged Jonathan in the last election, as its candidate.

¹ For further background, see CRS Report RL33964, *Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy*; CRS Report R43558, *Nigeria's Boko Haram: Frequently Asked Questions*; CRS Report R43756, *Al Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*; and other resources cited herein.

² Fatality figures linked to Boko Haram are difficult to verify. Both the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) African Studies Program Nigeria Social Violence Project (NSVP) and the Council on Foreign Relations' (CFR) Nigeria Security Tracker have compiled databases based on press reports of attacks that are available online. Estimates of Boko Haram's death toll range from over 9,000 (SAIS NSVP, from the year 2003 through December 2014), and 10,553 (CFR's Nigeria Security Tracker, from May 2011 to mid-January 2015), to 13,000 in some press reports. Some estimates include both deaths attributed to Boko Haram and to Nigerian security forces in the context of counterinsurgency operations (in addition to the 9,097 deaths from Boko Haram attacks, the NSVP estimates that state actors killed 4,967 militants and civilians in such operations from 2003 through 2014). Higher casualty estimates cited in the press recently may include a figure of 2,000 killed in the January 3-7, 2015 attack on Baga. The death toll in that attack has yet to be verified by humanitarian groups or international officials, and has been estimated by others at several hundred to 1,000. See also Will Ross, "Boko Haram Crisis: Why it is hard to know the truth in Nigeria," BBC, January 13, 2015; Siobhán O'Grady, "Counting Nigeria's dead from 480 miles up," *Foreign Policy*, January 15, 2015; and "Nigerian Lives Matter – the Baga Controversy," IRIN, January 15, 2015.

³ "UN: Refugees from Baga fighting could reach 20,000," VOA News, January 15, 2015; International Organization for Migration, "Boko Haram may have displaced over a million in Nigeria: IOM," January 20, 2015.

⁴ State Department Deputy Spokesperson Marie Harf, Daily Press Briefing, Washington, DC, January 13, 2015.

⁵ "Nigeria heads for closest election on record," Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 11, January 27, 2015.

Experts suggest that inter-faith relations in Nigeria, where the population is roughly divided between Christians and Muslims, have deteriorated in recent years.⁶ Religious identity overlaps with ethnic and regional identities in Nigeria, and the invocation of religious identity by some politicians in increasingly inflammatory political messages has stoked tensions in parts of the country. The U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom explains,

In an electoral context, the religious and ethnic affiliations of persons running for public office are important to most Nigerian voters and are always known to them; indeed many observers note that these are two of the most important bases on which people vote. If given a choice, Muslims tend to vote for Muslims and Christians for Christians. Both political parties understand the importance of the confluence of religious identity and politics, and both are highlighting religion in the campaign.⁷

In 2014, the PDP labeled the APC as “Nigeria’s Muslim Brotherhood,” although the party has not advocated an Islamist platform, and many key APC leaders were once top PDP officials (including several southern, Christian politicians who left the PDP over disagreements with Jonathan).⁸ Buhari’s running mate is a Christian Yoruba (Nigeria’s second largest ethnic group) from the opposition-leaning, populous southwest. Some in the PDP have tried to link the APC to the Boko Haram insurgency, despite Buhari having reportedly been the target of a Boko Haram attack in July 2014 and labeled more recently as an “infidel” by Boko Haram’s leader.⁹ Conversely, while the PDP historically has arguably been the most diverse of Nigeria’s political parties, internal divisions and defections to the opposition in the past year, notably among its northern members, have led some in the north to characterize the party under President Jonathan as representing primarily Christian and southern—and more specifically Niger Delta—interests.

The potential for violence around the elections is high (see **Figure 1** for potential hot spots). Previous elections have been marred by violence, and many analysts suggest that the prospects for electoral unrest have never been higher.¹⁰ An estimated 800 people were killed in violence following the last elections, in 2011, and some 65,000 were displaced. The post-election protests in the north against Jonathan’s victory highlighted grievances and mistrust of the government in that region. Such frustration is widely believed to have grown in the past four years as the impact of the Boko Haram insurgency has spread.¹¹ Further, many northern opponents of President Jonathan view his candidacy as illegitimate, given legal questions surrounding his eligibility and a popular view in the region that it is the north’s “turn” to hold the presidency.¹²

⁶ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Religious Freedom and Nigeria’s 2015 Elections*, January 2015.

⁷ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, op. cit. See also International Crisis Group (ICG), *Nigeria’s Dangerous 2015 Elections: Limiting the Violence*, November 21, 2014.

⁸ “PDP condemns dominance of APC executive by Muslims”, *ThisDay*, 8 January 2014.

⁹ “Nigeria Boko Haram ‘leader’ claims Baga attack in new video,” Reuters, January 20, 2015.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Andrew Noakes, “Playing politics with Nigeria’s insurgency risks civil war,” *New Internationalist* (blog), August 7, 2014; Jennifer Cooke and Richard Downie, “Countdown to Nigeria’s elections: Minimizing the dangers,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 21, 2015; and Tim Cocks, “Nigeria election tensions raise spectre of break-up,” Reuters, January 21, 2015. For potential hot spots, see the Fund for Peace’s *Nigeria Votes 2015* at <http://library.fundforpeace.org/nigeria-election-2015> and the CLEEN Foundation’s Security Threat Assessments.

¹¹ Leena Hoffman, *Who Speaks for the North? Politics and Influence in Northern Nigeria*, Chatham House, July 2014.

¹² Jonathan became president in 2010 after the death of President Umaru Yar’Adua, a northerner, in office (Jonathan was vice president). He then won election in 2011. Constitutionally, a president can only serve two 4-year terms. Court challenges to his candidacy have been unsuccessful. Jonathan’s presidency interrupts an unwritten political arrangement made upon the return to civilian rule in which the presidency was intended to rotate every 8 years among the country’s regions. See CRS Report RL33964, *Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard.

These tensions, overlaid atop simmering communal violence in parts of central and northern Nigeria, and alongside the potential for Boko Haram efforts to further destabilize the situation, have led some former U.S. officials to express alarm about the country's trajectory.¹³ Nigeria faces mounting economic pressures; political uncertainty around the elections and the prospect for security conditions to deteriorate further has deterred investors and undermined consumer confidence. The value of the Nigerian naira has plummeted against the dollar, and the government is struggling to balance competing budget demands, including the considerable cost of the elections and a rising security budget, amid a sharp drop in the global price of oil, a primary source of foreign exchange and government revenue.

Nigeria in Context

Nigeria is considered a key country in Africa because of its size and political and economic weight in the region. It is Africa's largest economy, largest oil producer, and most populous country, with almost 180 million people. Nigeria's Muslim population is among the largest in the world, vying with, and likely overtaking, Egypt's as the largest on the continent. Lagos, its commercial center, is among the world's largest cities.

Until recently, Nigeria routinely ranked among the United States' largest sources of imported oil. The United States imported over 40% of Nigeria's total crude oil exports until 2011, but U.S. purchases have since plummeted as domestic U.S. energy supply has increased. The Obama Administration still considers its relationship with the country to be among the most important on the continent, although reports suggest relations have deteriorated in the past year.¹⁴ Diplomatic engagement has been tempered at times over the years by Nigerian perceptions of U.S. intrusion in domestic or regional affairs, and by U.S. concern with human rights, governance, and corruption issues. Disagreements over Nigeria's approach to countering Boko Haram have become an increasing source of friction in the relationship.

Nigerian political life has long been scarred by ethnic, geographic, and religious conflict, and decades of corruption and misrule have undermined the state's authority and legitimacy. Divisions among ethnic groups, between north and south, and between Christians and Muslims, often stem from contention over access to land, jobs, and socioeconomic development. By some estimates, as many as 16,000 Nigerians have died in localized clashes driven by such tensions in the last decade (separate from the casualties caused by the Boko Haram conflict). In 2014, Nigeria was estimated to have the largest displaced population in Africa—more than 3.3 million people—and the third largest in the world.¹⁵ Years of social unrest, criminality, and corruption in the oil-rich Niger Delta have hindered oil production, undermined the Delta's economic development, and contributed to piracy in the Gulf of Guinea.

¹³ See Former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson, "Nigeria: Time for more international community attention and action," African Arguments (blog), January 19, 2015; and articles by two former U.S. ambassadors to Nigeria: John Campbell, "Nigeria's Elections in 2011 and 2015," Africa in Transition (blog), January 21, 2015 and "Good Luck, Jonathan: The problem with democracy in Nigeria," *Foreign Affairs*, January 27, 2015, and Princeton Lyman, "Staving off Nigeria's next train wreck," *Foreign Policy*, January 27, 2015.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Eric Schmitt, "With Schoolgirls taken by Boko Haram, U.S.-Nigeria ties falter," *New York Times*, December 31, 2014; Helene Cooper, "Rifts between U.S. and Nigeria impeding fight against Boko Haram," *New York Times*, January 24, 2015.

¹⁵ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global Overview 2014: People Internally Displaced by Conflict and Violence*, May 2014.

Other Challenges: Conflict in the Niger Delta, Transnational Crime, and Corruption

In the southern Niger Delta, local grievances related to oil production have fueled conflict and criminality for over a decade. Government efforts to negotiate with local militants and an amnesty program have quieted the restive region since 2009, but the peace is fragile. Some militants remain involved in local and transnational criminal activities, including piracy and drug and arms trafficking networks. These overlap with oil theft networks and contribute to the rising trend of piracy off the Nigerian coast and in the wider Gulf of Guinea, now considered one of the world's most dangerous bodies of water. The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime suggests that most piracy in the Gulf of Guinea can be traced back to the Niger Delta. Critics of the Jonathan Administration have raised concerns about pipeline security contracts awarded to former Delta militant leaders.¹⁶ Several former militants have issued threats of violence if Jonathan does not win the February 2015 election, and there are outstanding questions about the future of stipends paid by the government to former militants under the amnesty program, which is scheduled to expire this year.¹⁷

By some estimates, between \$3 billion and \$8 billion in Nigerian oil is stolen annually.¹⁸ Involvement in the theft and illegal trade of crude oil is not limited to Delta militants; politicians, security officers, and oil industry personnel are widely rumored to be implicated. Challenges in addressing oil theft are compounded by the lack of transparency in the Nigerian oil industry. Corruption in Nigeria is "massive, widespread, and pervasive," according to the State Department.¹⁹ Corrupt practices reportedly play a role in the allocation of oil revenues by state-level governments, concession licensing, and exploration and extraction permits. In January 2014, President Jonathan forced the country's central bank governor to resign after his memorandum regarding the national oil firm's failure to account for between \$10 billion and \$20 billion in revenue was leaked. To date, the issue of the missing billions remains unresolved.

While Nigeria's economy is Africa's largest, its human development indicators are among the world's lowest, and a majority of the population lives in extreme poverty. Nigeria has high income inequality by global standards and lags far behind South Africa, Africa's second-largest economy, on the U.N. Human Development Index. Over 40% of the current population is under the age of 15, and almost a third of primary-school-aged children are not enrolled in school. Nigeria's long-term economic growth is threatened not only by political instability and security challenges, but also by poor infrastructure and electricity shortages. Decades of economic mismanagement, instability, and corruption have hindered investment in Nigeria's education and social services systems and stymied industrial growth. Debt relief from the Paris Club of donors in 2005 has provided new opportunities for investment in Nigeria's social development, but experts stress a need to take action to forestall a relapse into unsustainable levels of debt that could prevent the country from meeting its development goals.

The announcement in October 2014 by the World Health Organization (WHO) that Nigeria was free of Ebola virus transmission brought positive attention to the country's coordinated effort to stop the spread of the virus, which has ravaged Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.²⁰ Nigeria's response also highlighted lessons learned in a country that until recently was considered a global epicenter of polio transmission. Nigeria's response to its Ebola outbreak was swift, with the government immediately declaring a national public health emergency and creating an operations center from which experts directed contact tracing, case management, health care worker protocols, and public education. The response benefited from applied epidemiology experience from Nigeria's polio eradication efforts; experts from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and

¹⁶ "Danger looms as piracy booms," *Africa Confidential*, December 5, 2014.

¹⁷ "House of Reps orders police probe on Dokubo, Kuku, over 2015 warnings," *Premium Times*, May 7, 2013.

¹⁸ Christina Katsouris and Aaron Sayne, *Nigeria's Criminal Crude: International Options to Combat the Export of Stolen Oil*, Chatham House, September 2013.

¹⁹ State Department, *2013 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, February 27, 2014.

²⁰ In July 2014, a Liberian American who was acutely ill landed at the Lagos airport. He was transferred to a private hospital where he was diagnosed with Ebola and later died. The virus then spread, via health care workers, to at least 19 other people in Lagos and the Niger Delta city of Port Harcourt. (A 20th case was suspected but not confirmed.)

Prevention and the WHO supported the effort. Nigeria has had other recent public health successes, nearly eradicating polio, decreasing malaria and tuberculosis prevalence, and reducing HIV prevalence among pregnant women. Nigeria still grapples with significant health sector challenges, though, and is home to nearly one-tenth of the world's HIV/AIDS infected persons—more than 3 million people—the largest HIV-positive population in the world after South Africa.

The 2015 Elections

Nigeria's upcoming elections will be a critical test for its political leaders, its security forces, and its people. The country was ruled by the military for much of the four decades after independence before transitioning to civilian rule in 1999. Elections held in the following decade were widely viewed as flawed, with each poll progressively worse than the last. The 2011 elections, in contrast, were seen by international observers as more credible than previous efforts, but not without problems, and the protests and violence that followed the polls suggested that many Nigerians lacked faith in the electoral process. Since then, donors and advocacy groups have pressed the government to improve electoral procedures and prosecute cases of electoral fraud and political violence to promote accountability and build public confidence.

While Nigeria's election commission has received praise for some of its efforts to improve the credibility of the process, including through an update of the voter register, other efforts have been hampered by inaction on electoral law reforms.²¹ Recent assessments of election preparations have raised some potentially significant concerns, including delays in the distribution of tens of millions of voter cards and the recruitment and training of poll workers. These issues, if not quickly addressed, could further erode confidence in the commission. The question of whether the country's sizeable internally displaced population can legally vote outside their home areas is a potential flashpoint, as is the possibility that parts of the northeast may be deemed too insecure to hold elections.²² Any of the above issues, if not adequately addressed, could lead to allegations that voters have been disenfranchised and to court challenges. Given the close nature of the race, they could call into question the credibility of the results.

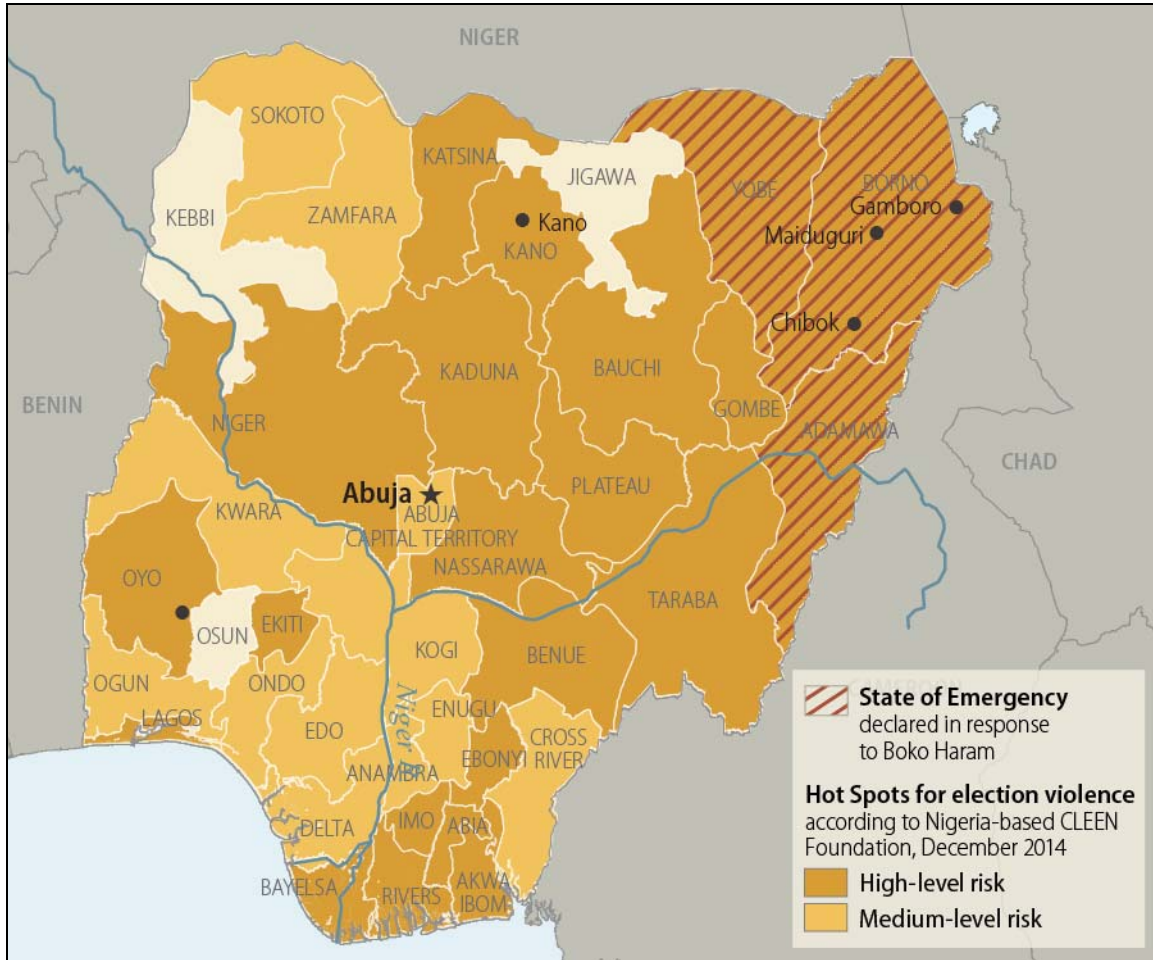
As noted above, Jonathan will again face Buhari at the polls on February 14, in a race widely expected to be much closer than in 2011, when Jonathan won with more than 59% of votes. Buhari received only 32% amid a crowded field of candidates. To win the presidency, a candidate must gain an absolute majority of the votes and at least 25% in two-thirds of the states. With some predictions of a race that could be decided by less than a million votes (with 68.8 million registered voters), concerns about both disenfranchisement and rigging are significant. High stakes around the historically contentious state gubernatorial races scheduled for February 28 offer further risks of rigging and violence around the polls. The presidential candidates'

²¹ For more on the pre-election environment, see National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), "Statement of the Joint NDI/IRI Pre-Election Assessment Mission to Nigeria," January 20, 2015.

²² If the areas most affected by Boko Haram were determined too insecure for elections to be held, the constitutional implications are unclear. (In addition to questions about disenfranchising voters, such a decision could impact the constitutional requirement for the winner of the presidential race to earn 25% of the votes in two-thirds of the states.) While certain past elections have been delayed by short periods of time, e.g., in 2011, for one week due to delayed delivery of ballots, there is no precedent under the constitution for a scenario in which elections could not be held in certain areas for an indeterminate period of time. Some election experts have proposed that polls in the northeast be held in a staggered schedule to allow security forces to concentrate more heavily on providing security in those areas (instead of trying to cover the entire country on one date.)

commitment to the recent Abuja Accord, an agreement in which they pledged to avoid statements or other election messages that could incite violence, will be tested in the coming weeks.

Figure I. Nigeria Election Hot Spots



Source: CRS graphics.

In 2014, the U.S. Consul General in Lagos wrote in an op-ed that Nigeria faced a “crisis of credibility” fueled by decades of impunity for large-scale corruption and electoral fraud.²³ According to a recent Gallup poll, only 13% of Nigerians express confidence in the electoral process.²⁴ Independent efforts to assess the process and verify the results, such as the “Quick Count” planned by the Transition Monitoring Group (a coalition of Nigerian civil society groups) may improve voter confidence. In the event of a close outcome, the perceived legitimacy of both the process and the results will be critical factors in averting potentially widespread protests and minimizing violence. Nigeria’s security forces, already stretched by deployments to counter Boko Haram (which targeted election facilities in 2011), will face an additional challenge in trying to

²³ U.S. Consul General Jeff Hawkins, “Countering the crisis of credibility,” U.S. Diplomatic Mission to Nigeria, June 6, 2014.

²⁴ Jay Loschky, “Ahead of poll, few Nigerians trust in elections,” Gallup, January 13, 2014.

secure the more than 120,000 polling stations without giving the perception of over-militarizing the elections. With public perceptions of security forces in the north already low in the context of abuses attributed to both the police and the military during operations to counter Boko Haram, allegations that some security agencies have been used by the PDP for political purposes may hinder their ability to ensure security and stability around and after the elections.²⁵

The Rising Threat of Boko Haram

Boko Haram has grown increasingly active and deadly in its attacks against state and civilian targets in Nigeria since 2010, calling for an uprising against secular authority and a war against Christianity.²⁶ The group draws on a narrative of vengeance for state abuses to elicit recruits and sympathizers, and appears to have increased its ranks through forced recruitment and jailbreaks.²⁷

After years of calling for the creation of an Islamic caliphate in Nigeria, the group now appears intent on establishing one by force. Since July 2014, Boko Haram has shifted from a tactical focus primarily on asymmetric attacks against government and civilian targets, toward a more strategic approach in which it has targeted key infrastructure like bridges and fuel depots, and mounted a conventional offensive to seize and hold territory. Estimates on the amount of territory held by Boko Haram vary, but press reports suggest that the Nigerian government may have lost between 40%-70% of Borno state and some additional territory in neighboring Yobe and Adamawa states, including border areas near Cameroon. To date, Nigerian forces have been able to counter large-scale assaults on the state capitals of Maiduguri and Damaturu, but such efforts have reportedly left many rural areas largely undefended against Boko Haram advances. Reuters calculated in mid-January 2015 that Boko Haram may hold 30,000 square km of territory, roughly the size of Maryland, while the London-based *Telegraph* put the figure at 20,000 square kilometers a week prior.²⁸ U.S. officials have not publically corroborated either estimate.

Boko Haram attracted increased international attention in 2014. Its April abduction of some 270 school girls from Chibok, a town in Borno, sparked both a domestic and international outcry and the Twitter campaign #BringBackOurGirls. While some of the girls escaped, the majority have yet to be returned to their families. In early June, Boko Haram deployed its first known female suicide bomber, in the northeast state of Gombe.²⁹ Weeks later, the group conducted its first known attack in southern Nigeria, using another female suicide bomber to target a fuel depot in Lagos. It has continued to target markets, bus stations, schools, banks, detention facilities and other government facilities, among other locations. In November, the group hit the central mosque in Kano, northern Nigeria's largest city, killing more than 120 and wounding almost 400.

The group's tactics and strategy evolved in 2014, with an upsurge of violence that included the increasing deployment of women and children as weapons as well as large-scale incursions to

²⁵ "Plans to arrest opposition leaders: APC lambasts PDP-controlled federal government," Sahara Reporters, January 4, 2015; and "Amaechi accuses security agencies of becoming armed wings of PDP," *Daily Post*, November 5, 2014.

²⁶ Its attacks have not exclusively, or even primarily, targeted Christians (a minority in the north), but periodic attacks on churches and Christian communities in north and central Nigeria nevertheless fuel existing religious tensions.

²⁷ The Terrorism Research Initiative has compiled a timeline of attacks at <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com>.

²⁸ Julia Payne, "Nigerians face killings, hunger in Boko Haram's 'state,'" Reuters, January 19, 2015; and David Blair, "Boko Haram is now a mini-Islamic State, with its own territory," *The Telegraph*, January 10, 2015.

²⁹ Elizabeth Pearson, "Nigeria's female suicide bombers: A show of strength," *War on the Rocks*, October 16, 2014.

take territory.³⁰ Some of its attacks, including the January 2015 raid on Baga and surrounding settlements in far northeast Borno, which may be its deadliest attack yet, appear to be retribution against communities seen to cooperate with Nigerian forces, including through vigilante groups.

While Boko Haram attacks have remained largely concentrated in northeast Nigeria, the group periodically strikes beyond that area and appears increasingly active in neighboring countries, notably Cameroon. Its leadership has appeared at times to be inspired by the Islamic State; it has modified its logo to incorporate the Islamic State flag, used its anthem in a video, and voiced support for both the Islamic State and Al Qaeda (AQ) in public messages.³¹ Boko Haram has not, however, publicly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, and U.S. officials do not consider the group to be an AQ affiliate.³²

Multiple factors have undermined the Nigerian security forces' response to Boko Haram, notably security sector mismanagement and corruption. By many accounts, troops are not adequately resourced or equipped to counter the insurgency despite a rising defense budget of more than \$5 billion in 2014 (roughly 20% of the government's total budget).³³ Many soldiers, particularly in the northeast, reportedly suffer from low morale, struggling to keep pace with a foe that appears increasingly well-armed and trained. In the assessment of DOD officials, Nigerian funding for the military is "skimmed off the top."³⁴ Greater U.S.-Nigerian coordination on counterterrorism efforts has also been hampered at times by a lack of cooperation from Nigerian officials. Nigerian government statements about its response to the Boko Haram threat have appeared, at times, out of touch with events. A government announcement in October 2014 of a purported cease-fire and hostage negotiations with Boko Haram, for example, was met with skepticism by many Nigerians as dozens were killed in attacks within days of the agreement allegedly taking effect. Likewise, security officials at times have downplayed the threat posed by Boko Haram's territorial advance and overplayed the success of their own response.³⁵ Recently, Nigerian government officials were criticized for making limited statements in the days after a major Boko Haram attack in which hundreds were killed while publicly expressing sympathy with France for the deaths of 16 terrorist attack victims in that country.³⁶

Boko Haram currently appears to pose a threat primarily to stability in northern Nigeria, and potentially to surrounding areas in neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. The group also poses a threat to international targets in those areas, including Western citizens. Boko Haram's leader has issued direct threats against the United States, but to date no U.S. citizens are known to have been kidnapped or killed by the group. The State Department designated Boko Haram and a splinter faction, Ansaru, as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) in November 2013. The United Nations Security Council added Boko Haram to its Al Qaeda sanctions list in May 2014. In its first formal public reaction to Boko Haram's activities, the Security Council issued a presidential statement on January 19, 2015 condemning the recent escalation of attacks and

³⁰ Ryan Cummings, "Boko Haram and the symmetry of asymmetric warfare," Global Observatory, December 10, 2014.

³¹ See, e.g., "Of Caliphates: FAQs about Boko Haram and ISIS," *Laud of War*, September 3, 2015.

³² The White House, President Barack Obama Holds Joint News Conference with United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron, January 16, 2015. See also State Department, Daily Press Briefings, May 19 and 20, 2014.

³³ "Jonathan signs Nigeria's 2014 budget as defense gets 20%," *Premium Times*, May 24, 2014.

³⁴ Testimony of DOD Principal Director for African Affairs Alice Friend, Senate Subcommittee on African Affairs, *#BringBackOurGirls: Addressing the Threat of Boko Haram*, May 15, 2014.

³⁵ See, e.g., Economist Intelligence Unit, "The tide is not yet turning against Boko Haram," October 6, 2014,

³⁶ "All Eyes on Paris, none for the 2,000 butchered in Baga," *The Nation*, January 18, 2015.

resulting humanitarian crisis. The Council also expressed concern that the situation was undermining peace and security in West and Central Africa and welcomed the efforts of countries in the region, as well as foreign donors, to support the creation of a multinational joint task force. Efforts to make a regional force operational have been hindered by a lack of cooperation, capacity, and in some cases political will, among the affected countries.

U.S. Policy and Assistance

After a period of strained relations in the 1990s during Nigeria's last military dictatorship, U.S.-Nigeria relations steadily improved in the 2000s, and until recently appeared comparatively strong. Positive relations have been significant in the context of Nigeria's role on the U.N. Security Council (as one of its nonpermanent members since January 2014), and in the context of global dialogues on such issues as nuclear nonproliferation. In addition to the strategic role their country often plays as a U.S. partner in the region and in global forums, Nigerians are the single largest African diaspora group in the United States. Nigeria is an important trading partner for the United States and is the second-largest beneficiary of U.S. private investment on the continent. In 2010, the Obama and Jonathan Administrations established the U.S.-Nigeria Binational Commission (BNC), a strategic dialogue to address issues of mutual concern. Its working groups cover a range of topics, including counterterrorism. Human rights issues have at times been an area of contention, not only in relation to the behavior of Nigeria's security forces but also on such topics as gay rights.³⁷

U.S. Assistance

Nigeria routinely ranks among the top recipients of U.S. bilateral foreign assistance in Africa. The United States is Nigeria's largest bilateral donor, providing roughly \$700 million annually in recent years. The State Department's FY2015 foreign aid request included more than \$720 million for Nigeria. Strengthening democratic governance, improving agricultural productivity and access to education and health services, promoting job creation and increased supplies of clean energy, and professionalizing and reforming the security forces have been priorities for U.S. assistance. Support related to the upcoming elections is wide-ranging and includes technical assistance to the election commission, support to civil society groups for voter education and efforts to mitigate violence, and funding for domestic and international observation missions.³⁸ Nigeria is a focus country under the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the President's Malaria Initiative (PMI), and the Obama Administration's Power Africa initiative. Nigerian farmers benefit from programs under the Feed the Future (FTF) initiative that focus on building partnerships with the private sector to expand exports and generate employment. Interventions to encourage private sector participation in trade and energy are also key components of the Obama Administration's economic growth initiatives. Bilateral cooperation on global health issues has been strengthened in the context of efforts to eradicate polio, and was critical in supporting Nigeria's effort to stop the spread of Ebola in the country.

³⁷ Homosexual acts have long been illegal in Nigeria, but a new law enacted in 2014, which set a 10-year prison sentence for persons supporting gay organizations or meetings, triggered a wave of anti-gay violence in the country.

³⁸ For more information on U.S. electoral support, see Testimony of Acting Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Robert P. Jackson, House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Human Rights and International Organizations, *Nigeria on the Brink?*, January 27, 2015.

U.S.-Nigeria Security Cooperation

U.S. security assistance to Nigeria is sizable by regional standards, ranging from \$15 to \$20 million annually in recent years. Nigeria also acquires U.S. defense materiel through U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS), Direct Commercial Sales (DCS), and Excess Defense Articles (EDA). Nigeria has historically played a significant role in peace and stability operations across Africa, and the State Department continues to provide assistance focused on enhancing Nigeria's peacekeeping capabilities. Given Nigeria's strategic position along the Gulf of Guinea and rising rates of piracy in the region, the United States coordinates with Nigeria on various maritime security initiatives, and the Nigerian navy is a recipient of substantial U.S. security assistance.

Counterterrorism cooperation with civilian agencies reportedly improved in the aftermath of the December 2009 "Christmas Day" airliner bombing attempt and the rise in the Boko Haram threat, but there are limits to that cooperation.³⁹ The Nigerian government has coordinated with the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Aviation Administration, and the International Civil Aviation Organization to strengthen its security systems in recent years, and the country now uses full body scanners in its international airports. Nigerian law enforcement agencies have received more than \$2 million annually in Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) in recent years. Nigeria is a participant in the State Department's Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a U.S. interagency effort that aims to increase regional counter-terrorism capabilities and coordination. Its role in TSCTP has been historically minor in comparison to Sahel countries, but is increasing—in FY2014, Nigeria received \$5 million in TSCTP programming focused on counter-IED training and civil-military relations, in addition to counter radicalization efforts. In the aftermath of the 2014 Chibok kidnapping, the Obama Administration deployed an interagency team to assess opportunities to support Nigerian efforts to counter Boko Haram and rescue the schoolgirls. As part of that effort, the Department of Defense (DOD) offered advisors to assist Nigerian forces and share information, including that obtained by intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets based in neighboring Chad. While some of that support is ongoing, it does not appear as robust as originally envisioned, which may be indicative of the recent cooling in bilateral relations. DOD support for regional efforts to counter Boko Haram is set to expand under a new \$40 million Global Security Contingency Fund (GSCF) program announced in 2014 that aims to enhance the institutional and tactical capabilities of Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, and improve regional coordination, to counter the threat. The extent to which Nigeria itself will benefit from that program, however, remains unclear.

The United States has long sought to balance security and human rights concerns in Nigeria. Political and human rights concerns have been a prominent factor in shaping U.S.-Nigeria relations for decades. State Department reports have continued to highlight serious human rights violations by the Nigerian security forces every year since the transition from military rule in 1999. U.S. security assistance to Nigeria has been constrained both by law and policy concerns, and, as noted above, the security relationship has been hampered at times by a lack of cooperation from Nigerian officials and systemic problems within its military. Security forces' abuses in the context of operations to counter Boko Haram have also complicated U.S. efforts to pursue greater cooperation, despite shared concerns about the group.⁴⁰ According to the State Department, the

³⁹ On December 25, 2009, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the son of a respected Nigerian banker and former government minister, attempted to detonate an explosive device on an American airliner bound from Amsterdam to Detroit. He was reportedly radicalized while living abroad. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula claims to have sponsored the effort.

⁴⁰ For more on alleged abuses, see also Amnesty International, "Nigeria's Military Implicated in War Crimes," August (continued...)

information on security force abuses currently implicates roughly half the units in the Nigerian army, and likely would render those units ineligible for assistance under congressionally mandated restrictions known as the “Leahy Laws,” if those units were submitted for vetting.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the State Department has cleared more than 1,000 members of the Nigerian security forces, and several hundred military and police units, for U.S. assistance in recent years.

While stressing the importance of the U.S.-Nigeria relationship and the gravity of security threats in, and potentially emanating from, the country, many U.S. officials remain concerned about these reported abuses, and about the role they may play either in tainting the military’s credibility among the population in the north or in fueling support for the insurgency. When Secretary of State John Kerry visited the African Union headquarters in Ethiopia in 2013, he raised the issue with Nigerian officials, stating, “...one person’s atrocity does not excuse another’s.”⁴² Administration officials have continued to reiterate this message and the need for Nigeria to improve its management of the security response, while also stressing the gravity with which the United States views the Boko Haram threat. Some Nigerian officials reportedly object to these comments as perceived U.S. interference in internal affairs and are dismissive of certain training offers.⁴³ Nigerian frustration also appears in part driven by unsuccessful efforts to acquire certain major U.S. defense equipment; the country has turned to Russia and China in recent years for helicopters, jets, and unmanned aerial platforms. Recent media reports suggest that relations between U.S. defense officials and certain branches of the Nigerian armed forces are strained.⁴⁴ In November 2014, Nigeria suspended advanced infantry training by U.S. Special Forces for an elite Nigerian army unit that had been cleared for assistance.

DOD officials have assessed the Nigerian forces as “slow to adapt with new strategies, new doctrines and new tactics,” and have described Nigeria as “an extremely challenging partner to work with.”⁴⁵ U.S. officials have encouraged the government to take a more comprehensive counterterrorism approach, and one that is, in the words of one former DOD official, “less brutal.”⁴⁶ One of the primary aims of DOD engagement has been to “convince the Nigerians to change their tactics, techniques, and procedures” in the northeast, in line with lessons the U.S. military learned in the context of counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Nigerian army has taken some steps in that direction, seeking support to develop its own civilian protection and human rights monitoring and training, for example. Nigerian officials have made statements suggesting an evolving counterterrorism strategy, one that seeks not only security, but also political and economic solutions, but implementation has been slow and uncertain.

(...continued)

5, 2014, and Human Rights Watch, *Spiraling Violence: Boko Haram Attacks and Security Force Abuses in Nigeria*, October 11, 2012 and “Nigeria: Massive Destruction, Deaths from Military Raid,” May 1, 2013.

⁴¹ For more on the Leahy laws and human rights vetting for security assistance, see CRS Report R43361, “Leahy Law” *Human Rights Provisions and Security Assistance: Issue Overview*, coordinated by Nina M. Serafino and Testimony of Lauren Ploch Blanchard, House Subcommittee in Africa, Global Health, Human Rights, and International Organizations, “Human Rights Vetting: Nigeria and Beyond,” July 10, 2014.

⁴² “Kerry Criticizes Nigeria on Human Rights,” CNN, May 25, 2013.

⁴³ See, e.g., On Terror’s New Front Line, Mistrust Blunts U.S. Strategy,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 26, 2013.

⁴⁴ Eric Schmitt, “With Schoolgirls taken by Boko Haram, US-Nigeria ties falter,” *New York Times*, December 31, 2014.

⁴⁵ Testimony of DOD Principal Director for African Affairs Alice Friend, Senate Subcommittee on African Affairs, *#BringBackOurGirls: Addressing the Threat of Boko Haram*, May 15, 2014.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

The Obama Administration has nevertheless publicly committed support for Nigerian efforts to counter Boko Haram, including through support for the Nigerian military.⁴⁷ USAID, the State Department, and the Broadcasting Board of Governors oversee programs to counter radicalization in Nigeria. The State Department and DOD continue to deliberate on how best to support a shift by Nigeria to “a comprehensive, holistic strategy for countering Boko Haram that protects civilians, respects human rights, and addresses the underlying causes of the conflict by bringing both civilian and security tools to the fight.”⁴⁸ In reference to counterterrorism cooperation, Secretary Kerry emphasized in his January 2015 visit to Nigeria, “bottom line, we want to do more...we are prepared to do more, but our ability to do more will depend to some degree on the full measure of credibility, accountability, transparency and peacefulness of this election.”⁴⁹

U.S. Efforts to Support a Regional Response to Boko Haram

In view of the growing impact Boko Haram has had on neighboring Cameroon, Niger, and Chad, U.S. officials have increasingly sought to support programs to improve counterterrorism coordination between Nigeria and its neighbors. Tensions in some of those countries' own relationships with Nigeria may hamper greater cooperation. Nigeria's neighbors reportedly worry about potential Nigerian military leaks of information to Boko Haram, and by some accounts view the Nigerian response as ineffective and are reticent to put their troops under Nigerian command of a regional force. As a result, their efforts to engage Boko Haram have been largely unilateral, although Chad, which has also been active in countering violent extremists in Mali, has recently offered increased support to Cameroon and Niger and deployed troops to Cameroon.

Several commentators, among them former U.S. officials, have offered various recommendations for shifts in the U.S. approach, ranging from calls for direct U.S. military action against Boko Haram to expanded support for the neighboring countries and new approaches to improving the effectiveness of the Nigerian army.⁵⁰ Former DOD official Alice Friend suggests that the latter, in the near term, may continue to be a challenge:

Today, almost everything the federal government does is seen as related to Jonathan's efforts to be re-elected next month, and some northern observers have argued that the government's disinterest in combatting Boko Haram has a regionalist bias to it. Likely low voter turnout in the northeast due to the mass population displacement will only exacerbate these tensions.⁵¹

In recent weeks, senior U.S. officials, including President Obama and Secretary Kerry, have discussed the Boko Haram crisis with French and British counterparts, recommitting their support for a regional strategy to counter the group. Ghana's president has called for a regional force to respond to the threat, a proposal that was reiterated during a recent regional summit on Boko Haram hosted by Niger and attended by a U.S. delegation led by the State Department's top Africa official. Nigeria, notably, did not send a senior official to the event. Boko Haram is

⁴⁷ Remarks by Secretary of State John Kerry at a Press Availability in Lagos, Nigeria, January 25, 2015.

⁴⁸ Testimony of Acting Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Robert P. Jackson, January 27, 2015, op. cit.

⁴⁹ Remarks by Secretary Kerry, January 25, 2015, op. cit.

⁵⁰ See former DOD official Alice Hunt Friend, “Besting Boko Haram,” War on the Rocks (blog), January 20, 2015; Elizabeth Donnelly, “Boko Haram's deadly advance must be stopped, but how?” *The Guardian*, January 12, 2015; Jacob Zenn, “Boko Haram is increasingly acting like the Islamic State. Why don't we treat it that way?” *Washington Post*, November 13, 2014; and Peter Pham, “Boko Haram has become Africa's ISIS,” *The Hill*, January 7, 2015.

⁵¹ Alice Hunt Friend, op. cit.

expected to top the agenda at the upcoming African Union (AU) Summit in Ethiopia (January 29-31), during which the regional body may call for the U.N. Security Council to endorse a regional military response and seek support from donors, including the United States, to establish a force similar to that created by the African Union for Somalia, and more recently Mali and the Central African Republic. (In the latter two countries, AU forces were later subsumed into U.N. peacekeeping operations.) While a multinational military mission may not be able to significantly shift the current approach of Nigeria's military to countering Boko Haram within Nigeria's borders, it may offer new opportunities for donors to enhance regional containment of the threat.

Outlook

The coming months may be a critical period in Nigeria, not only for its democratic trajectory, but for the security and stability of the country, and possibly the wider sub-region. Developments during this period may also have implications for congressional oversight of U.S. policy toward Nigeria. "No matter which candidate is declared victorious," one former U.S. ambassador to Nigeria argues, "there are plenty of reasons for the loser to reject the results."⁵² While Secretary Kerry has urged that elections be held on schedule, Nigeria's National Security Advisor recently called for the vote to be delayed, in response to reports that almost half the new voter ID cards, required for Nigerians to cast their ballots, had yet to be distributed.⁵³ The opposition has rejected any delay, viewing it as an attempt by President Jonathan to hold on to power. Another former senior U.S. diplomat has also called for the polls to be postponed, suggesting that the problems associated with voting in the northeast, the potential for fraud, and the reported influx of arms to volatile areas is an explosive mix that could render parts of the country "ungovernable" and allow the threat posed by Boko Haram to increase. He has called for the creation of a unity government and the restructuring of the security forces, contending that "there is no national consensus in Nigeria on how to deal with this [Boko Haram] insurgency, and no one seems prepared to confront it as the national crisis it is. Instead the matter has become deeply politicized, as competing regional factions accuse each other of active complicity with the terrorists."⁵⁴

Anxiety around the elections is high, and experts caution that Nigerians and the international community must prepare for a "less than perfect outcome."⁵⁵ A possible outcome in which Jonathan wins a narrow victory based in part on high turnout in his southern Niger Delta stronghold, while many in the northeast are unable to vote due to violence and mass displacement, may be difficult for some opposition supporters to accept. Some opposition politicians have threatened to form a parallel government if they view the polls as rigged.⁵⁶ If suggestions that the election campaign has been a distraction from counterinsurgency efforts are accurate, a post-election scenario of unrest could draw further attention and resources away from the Nigerian government's counterterrorism response. Without Nigerian cooperation, efforts by neighboring countries and the broader international community to intensify their response to Boko Haram may have limited effect inside Nigeria, where the group's impact is the greatest.

⁵² John Campbell, "Good Luck, Jonathan: The problem with democracy in Nigeria," *Foreign Affairs*, January 27, 2015.

⁵³ "Nigerian security chief urges vote delay, opposition refuse," Reuters, January 22, 2015.

⁵⁴ Princeton Lyman, "Staving off Nigeria's next train wreck," *Foreign Policy*, January 27, 2015.

⁵⁵ Jennifer Cooke and Richard Downie, op. cit.

⁵⁶ "APC ups the ante, insists on parallel government 'if the election is rigged,'" *ThisDay*, January 3, 2015.

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