



## **Boko Haram – A Serious Threat**

**Yossef Bodansky**

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### **Executive Summary**

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- \* Despite its growing notoriety, Boko Haram is but a small component of a wider and more convoluted Islamist-Jihadist challenge to the entire Heart of Africa – of which northern Nigeria is but an important part. The key to comprehending, confronting and ultimately defeating Boko Haram is thus in addressing the entire Islamist-Jihadist challenge at the Heart of Africa.
- \* Starting the second half of 2013, the Nigerian Jihadist movement – mainly Boko Haram and Ansaru – sought to formulate a viable command structure. A firm system of command and control was out of the question. Still, there emerged a pragmatic organizational framework under the banner of Boko Haram that seems to be largely functioning by summer 2014.
- \* The doctrine and strategy of the Nigerian Jihadist movement evolve. The sought-after destruction of the Nigerian state through fratricidal carnage is no longer only in revenge for being rejected by the grassroots, but also in pursuit of the larger quest for the establishment of an Islamist Sahelian-Maghrebi Caliphate that will replace existing states.
- \* In practical terms, though, there still exists separation between internal and regional operations with most commanders engaged in domestic operations only.
- \* The Nigerian Jihadist movement expanded and institutionalized its presence in, and cooperation with, regional Jihadist fronts and Shuras. The Nigerian Jihadists are rewarded with lavish weapon supplies and advanced training from their Al-Qaida-affiliated regional allies.
- \* The internal strategy of the Boko Haram is based on a combination of terrorizing the population through carnage and challenging the government with spectacular strikes. Boko Haram is focusing increasingly on martyr car-bombing against high-value targets.
- \* The most disturbing aspect of the Jihadist ascent is the penetration and subversion of the highest levels of the Nigerian security and intelligence services.
- \* The brewing crisis in Nigeria has global and continental ramifications. If Nigeria explodes – the rest of Africa will burn and the West will feel the pain acutely.



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## About the Author of this Issue

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Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State. He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports. Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



*Yossef Bodansky*



## ANALYSIS

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Boko Haram (Western Education Is Sacrilege in the Hausa language) burst into world attention after the mid-April 2014 kidnapping of more than 300 mostly Christian school girls between the ages of 16 and 18 from Chibok village in Borno State, northeastern Nigeria. Two months later, the majority of the girls have already been forced to convert to Islam and remain in captivity. They are scattered in groups among a few camps in northeastern Nigeria (mainly in the Sambisa Forrest Reserve in eastern Borno State close to the border with Cameroon), Cameroon's northern sliver (particularly in the Kolofata area, about 15 km from the border with Nigeria), the southwestern corner of Chad across the Cameroon border, and the Birao region of the Central African Republic near the Sudan border. The videos posted by Boko Haram are believed to have been shot in the vicinity of the Sambisa Forrest Reserve in eastern Borno State. Several girls were sold as bounty-wives to Boko Haram mujahedin for 2,000 Naira (~US\$12) each. "Some of them have been married off to insurgents. A medieval kind of slavery. You go and capture women and then sell them off," community elder Pogu Bitrus of Chibok town reported. Boko Haram's Amir Hassan Ali of Maiduguri boasted he already married two of the girls while in the Sambisa forest. In early May, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau warned that other girls might be sold as slaves should Abuja refuse negotiations. "Allah instructed me to sell them, they are his properties and I will carry out his instructions. ... By Allah, I will sell them in the marketplace," he vowed. Abuja's insistence that the Army has long known where the girls' whereabouts is irrelevant for no rescue operation is possible without risking the lives of all or most of the girls.

Despite its growing notoriety, Boko Haram is but a small component of a wider and more convoluted Islamist-Jihadist challenge to the entire Heart of Africa – of which northern Nigeria is but an important part. The key to comprehending, confronting and ultimately defeating Boko Haram is thus in addressing the entire Islamist-Jihadist challenge at the Heart of Africa.<sup>1</sup>

The January 2013 French-led intervention in Mali excited the entire Jihadist movement throughout the Heart of Africa. Theological and personal disagreements were pushed aside in order to rally to the help of the Jihadists of Azawad as well as strike French and Western interests wherever possible. Mokhtar Belmokhtar established a rudimentary ad-hoc Shura to coordinate operations that included commanders from AQIM, Ansar Dine (Supporters of the Faith in Arabic), MUJAO (French acronyms of The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa), Ansaru, Boko Haram, and a host of smaller Jihadist entities. An Ansaru commander called Abu Ali al-Nigeriai was a senior member of Belmokhtar's Shura. The Shura also oversaw the growing flow of weapons, munitions and funds from Libyan arsenals and their distribution among the region's Jihadist forces. Many weapons, including IEDs, recovered from Boko Haram since mid-2013 were traced to Libya.

Between March and May 2013, Ansaru and Boko Haram groups attacked along Nigeria's border with Niger and Cameroon in order to tie down local forces so they couldn't be sent to Mali. Ansaru fighters participated in several spectacular operations inside Niger including attacks on a French uranium mine in Arlit and the prison in Niamey. Both Ansaru and Boko Haram established rear bases in southern Niger to be used as safe havens and recruitment and training facilities. Meanwhile, Boko Haram led the operations in Cameroon – particularly the kidnappings of French citizens between March and November 2013. Islamist sympathizers in Yaounde and

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<sup>1</sup> This brief analysis focuses on the latest developments in northern Nigeria. It is extracted from a comprehensive study of Nigerian Jihadism: Yossef Bodansky, „The Boko Haram and Nigerian Jihadism“, ISPSW/ETH Zurich publication no. 276, June 2014



other cities organized riots, robberies and extortions in support of the Boko Haram and against France and its allies.

Starting the second half of 2013, the Nigerian Jihadist movement – mainly Boko Haram and Ansaru – sought to formulate a viable command structure. Given the size and diversity of northern Nigeria, the paucity of communications and transportation, and the personalities of the key Jihadist commanders – a firm system of command and control was out of the question. Still, there emerged a pragmatic organizational framework under the banner of Boko Haram that seems to be largely functioning by summer 2014.

### Organisational Framework

Boko Haram is led by an Amir ul-Aam (Commander in Chief) – Abubakar Shekau. He is answerable to a Shura (Council) of trusted Kwamandoji (Commanders in the Hausa language). Significantly, the Shura includes not only Boko Haram's senior regional commanders but also representatives of Ansaru, AQIM, MUJAO and others. The Shura is Boko Haram's highest decision-making body, and the Amir ul-Aam cannot launch major operations, formulate strategy or issue communiqués without the approval of the Shura. The Shura is functioning efficiently though, given the realities on the ground, not frequently.

Very little is known about the members of the Shura or even its size – estimated at 6-8 members. The only two known members are Mamman Nur, who is Shekau's second-in-command, and Ansaru's Khalid al-Barnawi. Other reported Shura members include Ibrahim Tada Ngalyike from Gwoza, member of the original "Nigerian Taliban" Aminu Tashen-Ilmi, and a faction leader known only as Abu Sumayya. There are conflicting reports whether Abu Kaka or Abu Qaqa – the media face of Boko Haram – is a Shura member. The identity of past members should be indicative. The three known members are Habibu Yusuf (killed in early 2013), Momodu Bama (aka Abu Saad, heavy-weapons experts and the son of Mallam Abatcha Flatari who provided charms for the soldiers until both were killed in late 2013), and Mohammed Zangina (who was involved in coordinating suicide bombings before his arrest in early 2013).

The main problem of the Boko Haram command and control system seems to be at the localized level. As a populist movement immersed in fratricidal violence all over the land, Boko Haram must be represented in every region and city. To achieve this, the Boko Haram has a system of local Amirs who are in charge of specific areas. Large cities and densely populated areas are subdivided into Lajna (Sectors in the Hausa language) each of which is being run fairly autonomously by a sub-Amir. The Amirs and sub-Amirs are supported by Kwamandoji who run operations on a localized level. Each Commander is in turn assisted by a Nabin (Deputy in the Hausa language). Each Nabin controls at least one Mu'askar (Lieutenant) who is the real leader and commander of the violent armed gangs that carry out Boko Haram's murderous raids. Known commanders include Abdulmalik Bama, Umar Fulata, Alhaji Mustapha (aka Massa Ibrahim), Abubakar Suleiman Habu, Hassan Jazair, Ali Jalingo, Alhaji Musa Modu, Bashir Aketa, Abba Coroma, Ibrahim Bashir, Abubakar Zakariya and Tukur Ahmed Mohammed. There are also new zonal commanders for Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States who are unknown. Significantly, only a few of the more senior Amirs and Kwamandoji are members of the Boko Haram Shura.



## Doctrine and Strategy

The doctrine and strategy of the Nigerian Jihadist movement – including Boko Haram and Ansaru – evolved since the winter of 2013/14. The hitherto distinct regional and internal-domestic strategies have been blurred. The key novelty is that the sought-after destruction of the Nigerian state through fratricidal carnage is no longer only in revenge for being rejected by the grassroots, but also in pursuit of the larger quest for the establishment of an Islamist Sahelian-Maghrebi Caliphate that will replace existing states. In practical terms, though, there still exists separation between internal and regional operations with most commanders engaged in domestic operations only.

The internal strategy of the Boko Haram is based on a combination of terrorizing the population through carnage and challenging the government (at all levels) with spectacular strikes. Boko Haram is focusing increasingly on martyr car-bombing against high-value targets in Abuja and other cities and major attacks on key facilities in rural areas. Since 2012, Boko Haram has also contemplated the conduct of spectacular operations against oil and transportation infrastructure in the south in order to demonstrate nation-wide outreach. In early 2014, there are indications the Boko Haram is finally getting ready to strike in the south. In winter 2013/14, Boko Haram formed “special kidnapping squad” most likely run jointly by al-Barnawi and Nur from across the Cameroonian border. The main mission of the squad is generating funds through payments of ransom for foreigners.

Most gruesome, though, is the cruel and senseless killing and displacing of innocent Muslim civilians – particularly in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States. Locally-based factional commanders, most notably Ngalyike and Tashen-Ilmi, play prominent role in directing the internal operations. For these internal operations, Boko Haram fields about 500 to 1,000 fighters with a few thousand youth that can be recruited for short-term mob violence as need be. Since the winter of 2013/14 there has been a marked escalation in the carnage against civilians. The data Abuja has is incomplete at best. However, even the rough numbers paint a horrific picture. In 2013, at least 3,000 people were killed by Boko Haram and other Jihadist entities. Since January 2014, at least 5,000 people were killed – over 2,000 in Borno State alone. The pace and scope of fratricidal killing have markedly increased since mid-May 2014. The financial costs to Nigerian society and the nation are inestimable.

## Recent Developments

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the Jihadist ascent is the penetration and subversion of the highest levels of the Nigerian security and intelligence services. These achievements were made possible by the training of Nigerian Jihadists in Sudan – including by experts from Iranian Intelligence and expert assistance provided by Iranian agents and operatives in Nigeria itself. The endemic corruption within the Nigerian elites made things easier for the Jihadists. The extent of the penetration first came to light in early March 2012 when a British Special Boat Service (SBS) hostage rescue attempt in Sokoto failed. The rescue mission was betrayed by high authorities in Abuja even before it commenced. Consequently, the Ansaru-affiliated Jihadists had time to murder their hostages and ambush the SBS troops as they approached the compound.

Presently, official Abuja can no longer ignore the threat. In late May 2014, Lt. Col. (Ret.) Rudolph Atallah, the former Africa Counterterrorism Director for the Department of Defense warned that “there was a Nigerian internal investigation of nine generals and senior military officers all suspected of aiding and abetting Boko



Haram. The officers were suspected of giving them weapons, access to the armories, and information on government tactics and targeting. It is very difficult to counter an organization when internally, within the Nigerian structure, there are political, militarily, and logistical issues.” Among the weapon systems betrayed to the Boko Haram were several vehicles and at least one QJG-02 PRC-made 14.5mm anti-aircraft machine-gun recently acquired by the Nigerian Army. On June 3, a Nigerian military court indicted 15 senior military officers for helping Boko Haram. “There are a lot of arrests that have been made over some officers who were sabotaging the ongoing counter-insurgency operations. The suspects include about 10 generals and other ranks, not to talk of soldiers who have been found culpable of sabotaging our operations,” a Nigerian military source explained. “They were found guilty of leaking military strategies to the Boko Haram people. This was why many soldiers have been ambushed and killed by Boko Haram.” Nigerian senior officials concede that these cases are but the tip of the iceberg and only the most blatant cases official Abuja could not ignore or brush aside.

Theologically, the main reason for the blurring of the separation between internal and regional operation is the Jihadists’ rejection of the modern state and its boundaries in favor of all-encompassing Ummah and Caliphate. On May 5, 2014, Shekau stated that “we don’t know Cameroon or Chad... I don’t have a country. Islamiyya is what I have.” For practical reasons, Boko Haram and Ansaru maintain safe-havens across the Nigerian border in Niger, Chad and Cameroon. In early 2014, they were stockpiling Libya-origin weapons caches and other supplies in these bases. These weapons include several SA-7 and SA-24 MANPADS originally delivered by AQIM to Agadez, Niger, in 2011/12 but handed over to the Nigerians only in late 2013. These undertakings are conducted under Nur and al-Barnawi. Nur was responsible for the dispensation of the several millions obtained as ransom for Kidnapped Europeans on weapons acquisition and construction of infrastructure along the Chadian-Cameroonian and Niger borders.

Meanwhile, the Nigerian Jihadist movement expanded and institutionalized its presence in, and cooperation with, regional Jihadist fronts and Shuras. In August 2013, a commander going by Abu Zamira noted that Boko Haram had “commanders as far afield as Niger, Chad, Sudan and Cameroon” who are involved in the Nigerian Jihad. In spring 2014, Boko Haram started joint kidnapping-for-ransom operations in Cameroon with Jihadist gangs and Séléka fighters from the Central African Republic. The Boko Haram’s reputation for ruthlessness was admired by the Séléka that invited Nigerian Jihadists to come to the Central African Republic to train the local forces and lead strike operations against the French forces. In May, several dozen Nigerian Jihadists were already fighting in the Central African Republic. In Bangui, Séléka fighters inscribed “Bocouharam [Boko Haram]” on their uniforms in appreciation of their fellow fighters. The Nigerian Jihadists in the northern Central African Republic also participated in regional raiding parties stretching into Sudan and Chad.

Nur continues to handle the Shura’s contacts and cooperation with AQIM, MUJAO, the Shabaab, and other sponsors in Sudan and the Persian Gulf region. Most significant was the emergence in spring 2014 of a Nigerian branch of Ansar al-Sharia (Partisans of the Sharia) that is an off-shoot of the global Jihadist movement and al-Qaida. The Ansar al-Sharia handles in a concentrated fashion the flow of foreign experts to Nigeria as well as of Nigerian mujahedin returning from foreign Jihadist fronts – mainly Afghanistan-Pakistan, Syria, Somalia and Yemen. The travel of Nigerian Jihadists throughout the Sahel and the Maghreb is conducted locally.



In spring 2014, high-level Jihadist sources in Europe and in Syria-Iraq predicted that the Nigerian Jihad will soon reach Western Europe. The sources claim that the Boko Haram already has networks of supporters among the Nigerian ex-pats in the UK. These networks are being reinforced by the few UK-based Nigerians that were or still are in Syria. As well, the Boko Haram developed “solidarity networks” in cooperation with AQIM-controlled Maghrebi ex-pats in France and Belgium. These networks are also being radicalized and reinforced by veterans of the Syrian Jihad. To-date, the Nigerian Jihadists did not address strikes at the heart of the West or even outside the Heart of Africa. The designation in the West of the Boko Haram and several senior commanders as terrorists were shrugged. However, with the specter of Western military intervention against the Boko Haram in support of the Nigerian Government growing – the leaders of Boko Haram and Ansaru might be contemplating retaliatory strikes against their foes.

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The brewing crisis in Nigeria has global and continental ramifications. Nigeria produces 2.6% of the annual international consumption and Nigeria’s energy reserves are among the most unutilized and thus have long-term promise. With a population nearing 150 million, Nigeria is the most important country of sub-Saharan Africa and has the largest economy. If Nigeria explodes - the rest of Africa will burn and the West will feel the pain acutely.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.