



## **Boko Haram: No Longer Just a Threat to the State of Nigeria but to the Entire Continent of Africa and the West**

**Yossef Bodansky**

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### **Executive Summary**

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- \* The summer of 2014 saw a marked escalation in Boko Haram attacks on the civilian Muslim-majority population throughout northern Nigeria. However, the key development is the further integration of Boko Haram into the global Jihadist trend.
- \* On August 24, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau announced the establishment of an independent Islamic Caliphate throughout northeastern Nigeria.
- \* In November 2014, Sudan, Iran and Qatar committed to sponsoring and sustaining an Islamist-Jihadist surge into the Heart of Africa. The surge will rely on two Islamist springboards – the Derna Caliphate in eastern Libya and the Boko Haram Caliphate in Nigeria. The anticipated role of the Boko Haram Caliphate as the Islamists-Jihadists springboard requires Shekau to closely follow Baghdadi's Takfiri Jihadism.
- \* The evolution of the Boko Haram strategy since early November 2014 put a growing emphasis on preparing the infrastructure and territory required by the foreign partners and sponsors for the anticipated escalation. The Boko Haram upper-most leaders expect a major escalation in the fighting in northeastern Nigeria. In early January 2015, state sponsorship is the dominant factor in the transformation of African Islamism-Jihadism – including the Boko Haram.
- \* The pursuit of the Caliphate has already transformed the Boko Haram into an integral part of a larger geo-strategic and geo-economic mega-trend. The long-term threat of the Boko Haram is growing because the Islamic Caliphate in Syria-Iraq provides proof and precedents that establishing a Caliphate is possible in the 21st Century, and the sponsoring states – Sudan, Iran and Qatar – make this quest possible in the Heart of Africa through their largesse. Hence, the Boko Haram is no longer just a threat to the State of Nigeria but to the entire continent of Africa and the West.



## About ISPSW

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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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The summer of 2014 saw a marked escalation in Boko Haram attacks on the civilian Muslim-majority population throughout northern Nigeria. The attack methods range from car-bombs to martyr-bombers to indiscriminate shootings into crowded places. The intensity and magnitude of the carnage inflicted upon the civilian population is unprecedented. The attacks have become increasingly vicious and indiscriminate.

Lethal and painful as the indiscriminate carnage has been, this is not the significant development in Nigerian Jihadism during summer 2014. The key development is the further integration of Boko Haram into the global Jihadist trend. It is toward this end that the Boko Haram started their still unfolding consolidation in the northeast. On August 6, a large and well equipped mobile force of the Boko Haram attacked and seized the town of Gwoza, Borno State. Boko Haram launched their major offensive in the third week of August in order to bring about a profound change in the situation in northern Nigeria.

On August 24, the Boko Haram posted a video in which Abubakar Shekau announced the establishment of an independent Islamic Caliphate throughout northeastern Nigeria. Shekau declared that Gwoza was the capital of the Islamic Caliphate. He reiterated the complete rejection of the modern state by the Boko Haram. "We don't believe in the name Nigeria. We are in [an] Islamic Caliphate. We have nothing to do with Nigeria," Shekau explained. "Thanks be to Allah, who gave victory to our brethren in Gwoza and made it part of the Islamic Caliphate. By the grace of Allah, we will not leave the town. We have come to stay."

The Boko Haram continued to consolidate and expand their Caliphate throughout northeastern Nigeria. By the end of October, the Caliphate already controlled well over 20,000 square kilometers [SqKm]. The Boko Haram also extended the spread of terrorism in the northeast to areas adjacent to the Caliphate. These raids and bombings demonstrated the growing reach and impunity of the Boko Haram forces.

Ultimately, the further radicalization of the Boko Haram in fall 2014, including the growing viciousness of their attacks, is a reflection of the overall transformation of the Jihadist movement in the Maghreb and the Sahel. During the fall, senior commanders of the Boko Haram arrived in southern Libya from Nigeria, Mali and Syria-Iraq in order to participate in the regional Jihadist effort. Under their supervision, close to a hundred Nigerian fighters are receiving expert training in the three secret camps in southern Libya. The first Nigerian Jihadists are scheduled to graduate in early 2015. The Nigerian branch of Ansar al-Sharia is already preparing for their infiltration back to Nigeria. As these expert Jihadists arrive in the Caliphate, and the Nigerian North as a whole, they will further transform and escalate the Boko Haram's insurrection and terrorism Jihad.

The strategic-regional context of the Boko Haram's Jihad changed profoundly in early November 2014. This was a direct result of the evolving geo-strategic grand designs of the key aspirant powers – Sudan, Iran and Qatar – that committed to sponsoring and sustaining an Islamist-Jihadist surge into the Heart of Africa. The surge will rely on two Islamist springboards – the Derna Caliphate in eastern Libya and the Boko Haram Caliphate in Nigeria. The envisioned surge will be a three-prong east-to-west surge – a northern arm along the shores of the Mediterranean originating from Libya, a central arm through the Sahel originating from both Libya and Nigeria, and a southern arm along the shores of the Gulf of Guinea originating from Nigeria. By the time the surge is completed, there will emerge an Islamist-Jihadist bloc from the Red Sea in the east to the Atlantic in the west, and from the Mediterranean in the north to the Gulf of Guinea in the south.



To make sure that Shekau and the Boko Haram Caliphate can indeed deliver on the growing expectations – senior intelligence officials of the key sponsoring states and the Jihadist Takfiri trend resolved to submit the Boko Haram to a very close inspection. In mid-October, they sent a small delegation of senior commanders and experts to personally inspect and assess the situation in the Boko Haram Caliphate. A couple of weeks later, the experts returned to Khartoum and then to Raqqah (the capital of Baghdadi’s Caliphate) very impressed not just by the military and organizational capabilities of the Boko Harm, but also by the Islamist Jihadist knowledge and zeal of Shekau and his closest aides. The visitors were particularly impressed by the commitment of their hosts to building the Boko Haram Caliphate on the basis of the same Islamic teachings that are the cornerstone of Baghdadi’s ideological doctrine. The experts recommended that the Takfiri Jihadist trend should tell would be volunteers from all over the Muslim World that if they could not reach Baghdadi’s Islamic Caliphate because of travel difficulties they should go instead to the Derna Caliphate and the Boko Haram Caliphate.

The decision to use Nigeria as a springboard would, in turn, determine the states’ sponsorship of the Boko Haram and their facilitation of the still unfolding marked escalation of the Boko Haram’s assault on the State of Nigeria. In fall 2014, the leaders of Iran and Sudan were convinced that Abubakar Shekau and the Boko Haram will be able to facilitate the revival of their grand design for west Africa. The success in sponsoring the Jihad in Libya in fall 2014 prompted Tehran and Khartoum to increase the direct involvement of Qatar in other endeavors in sub-Saharan Africa. The decision was also affected by the prominence of Qatar with other Sunni Jihadist movements, and especially the Caliphate, that were increasingly influencing Shekau and the Boko Haram Shura.

The anticipated role of the Boko Haram Caliphate as the Islamists-Jihadists springboard into the rest of west Africa requires Shekau to closely follow Baghdadi’s Takfiri Jihadism. Unlike earlier surges into the Heart of Africa, the Jihadism sponsoring states are now convinced that they have a sound territorial springboard in the Boko Haram Caliphate. In late-2014, the Caliphate was tightly controlling around 50,000 SqKm or 6% of the territory of Nigeria, and partially controlling additional 130,000 SqKm – for a total of around 180,000 SqKm or close to 20% of the territory of Nigeria.

Unlike the Sahel areas under the dominance of AQIM – the Caliphate has densely populated area with solid transportation infrastructure, electricity and mobile phones, water and food. The Boko Haram Caliphate includes both cities with technically skilled urban population and food-producing rural area. Thus, the Boko Haram Caliphate can serve as a secure long-term springboard for further surge into the Heart of Africa. Therefore, it became imperative for the sponsoring states to quickly organize supplies of weapons, funds and expert cadres to assist Shekau in consolidating his rule over northeastern Nigeria and be able to surge from there.

The evolution of the Boko Haram strategy since early November 2014 put a growing emphasis on preparing the infrastructure and territory required by the foreign partners and sponsors for the anticipated escalation. Concurrently, the Boko Haran has focused on politically spectacular operations in order to undermine the stability, and ultimately the very existence, of the Nigerian State in its current borders. The first priority is to delegitimize the Federal Government, not just one president or another. The next priority is to alienate the entire Muslim population of the North by inflicting heavy casualties, preventing daily life, and demonstrating the government’s inability to protect the people and ensure safe and secure everyday life. Taken together, these two priorities will inevitably have major impact on the presidential elections. Boko Haram leaders are convinced they are on the winning streak militarily. They have weapons and ammunition, food and other supplies, for 12-18 months of intense fighting.



Meanwhile, between early November and mid-December, Boko Haram raids and attacks continued to spread and escalate throughout the region – mainly in Yobe, Borno and Adamawa States, but also beyond and increasingly in Gombe and Bauchi States. The Boko Haram largely succeeded in blocking military counterattacks on the key contested cities – albeit at a high cost in fighters and weaponry. Essentially, this was a transition period in which the ongoing military activities of the Boko Haram continued along proven lines while the strategy and force structure evolved on the basis of newly acquired weaponry, arrival of expertise, and emerging missions as a result of the new regional role. New weapons and better tactics originating in the battlefields of Syria-Iraq became more prevalent in the Boko Haram operations between late November and early December. In late-November, the Boko Haram started using Middle East-type IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices).

In late December 2014, the Boko Haram was seizing and sustaining the military initiative at the strategic and operational levels. The Boko Haram forces were operating in internal lines and exploiting fully their superior speed of force movements. Highly mobile and heavily armed columns strike repeatedly and frequently and in different locations – forcing the Nigerian military to operate its forces in external lines. The military exhausts resources in pursuits and counter attacks when the bulk of the Boko Haram forces are long-gone and shifting to new attack spots. The Boko Haram succeeded to shoot down helicopters and strike aircraft – thus negating air power that is usually the greatest advantage regular armies have over irregular forces. The Boko Haram forces frequently ambushed and defeated Nigerian Army units up-to and including battalions. Meanwhile, the Nigerian military's recapturing of cities proved short-lived because of ferocious counter-attacks by the Boko Haram that also forced IDPs by the tens of thousands.

The Boko Haram could field a force of up-to 50,000 fighters. Of these, between 15,000 and 20,000 mujahedin were highly trained and well equipped fighters. They used the bulk of the armored vehicles, Technicals, all-terrain tractors and motorcycles. The remaining 30,000 mujahedin were auxiliary fighting forces of varying qualities. These included about 15,000 locally recruited volunteers. The high unemployment throughout the North has created large groups of disgruntled youth who have proven susceptible to Boko Haram recruitment. Moreover, Boko Haram began to offer signing bonuses and monthly payment to local youth. The volunteers initially underwent rudimentary military training. Equipped largely with small arms and low-quality vehicles, they performed guard and patrol duties. As the training and experience of these fighters improve – they will be integrated into the main high-quality fighting forces. The Boko Haram also had about 10,000 forced recruits that routinely provided technical and logistical services but could be pressed to defensive duties when needed. Most alarming were the over 5,000 boy-soldiers. Most of them were kidnapped boys that were indoctrinated into Jihadist zeal. Teams of boy-soldiers started as back-up second wave fighters. After gaining experience and proving their zeal, they are moved to special units where they are involved in sensitive missions such as intelligence collection, transporting sabotage equipment, and assassination of Nigerian "high value targets." In a few years these boy-soldiers will become a zealot hard-core of the Boko Haram elite forces.

The rising international profile and growing international cooperation of the Boko Haram had major impact on the composition of their manpower. In the elite mujahedin units there are several hundreds, probably well over a thousand, fighters from Chad, Niger and Cameroon. The initial cross-border recruitment was from population groupings that belong to the same tribes and speak the same local languages. However, as the notoriety of the Boko Haram grew throughout west Africa – there emerged a steady flow of local Jihadists seeking frameworks, training and experience they can subsequently bring back to their own home countries. These Jihadists are being integrated into the units of Nigerian local volunteers and like them acquire experience and move up-ward in the hierarchy.



In mid-2014, there also began a flow of returning Nigerian and other African volunteers arriving from foreign Jihads. At least 100 Nigerian veterans returned from Syria-Iraq, and dozens of others returned from Somalia, Mali and the training camps in Libya. Over 100 highly trained Nigerians are expected to arrive from the training camps in southern Libya during 2015. A few friends from other west African states accompanied their Nigerian counterparts from foreign Jihads and joined the Boko Haram. In mid-2014, recruiters of the Islamic Caliphate arrived in Nigeria with returning Jihadists from the Middle East. They are seeking Muslim volunteers for the Jihad fronts in Syria-Iraq and Libya. Since summer 2014, the KHI recruited 40-60 such Nigerian volunteers. These volunteers will receive advanced training and, if they survive, will be returning to Nigeria as experienced commanders starting 2016. Since many of these recruits are from the Lagos slums and other cities in the South – they will expedite the spread of the Jihadist struggle to the South.

The Boko Haram upper-most leaders expect a major escalation in the fighting in northeastern Nigeria. In mid-December, the Boko Haram's operational plans for the first months of 2015 envisaged attacks on 25 towns and villages all over the five states of Adamawa, Borno, Bauchi, Gombe, and Yobe. The aggregate impact of these attacks should be the further consolidation and large expansion of the Caliphate. Therefore, the Boko Haram's amirs and kwamandoji (commanders in the Hausa language) invoked the percept of "Kufr al-Akbar" – that is, cardinal or mortal apostasy – as a definition for any forbidden action by Boko Haram units and commanders. Kufr al-Akbar now covered withdrawal from cities and towns, as well as negotiations with any government authorities (Military, State and Federal). Any notion of compromise was declared Kufr al-Akbar. This means that the only way to defeat the Boko Haram is occupation of the territory they hold and the killing of their commanders and leaders. Meanwhile, the sponsoring states that are ready to invest more in protecting and expanding the Boko Haram Caliphate through the growing flow of weapons, funds and experts.

In early January 2015, state sponsorship is the dominant factor in the transformation of African Islamism-Jihadism – including the Boko Haram. The objectives of the Boko Haram Caliphate in the northeast are no longer only inward looking – that is, to liberate Nigeria's Muslims, to establish a righteous Islamic State, and to destroy the apostate Nigerian State. The Boko Haram Caliphate has evolved into also becoming a major pillar – along with the Derna Caliphate in Libya – of the Islamist-Jihadist three-prong surge throughout the Heart of Africa. The Boko Haram joins other regional entities like the Ansar al-Sharia, al-Murabitun, and al-Shabab in defining their own area of interest and activity as extending from the Red Sea to the Atlantic. Indeed, the Boko Haram's ideology now inspires other Islamist-Jihadist movements in Africa. In late-December 2014, Ghana police uncovered in Akim Ofoase Zongo, eastern Ghana, a small cell that formed "a Boko Haram group" committed to "running a pure Islamic community." The mid-January 2015 Charlie Hebdo riots in Niger turned very violent and lethal. Throughout, the Islamist rioters also chanted support for, and solidarity with, the Jihad of the Boko Haram.

The Boko Haram's quest for military power has thus evolved from focusing on insurrection and terrorism to defeating armies and conquering and holding large swaths of territory. Toward this end, the Boko Haram began acquiring the capacity to fight conventional wars against the armed forces of states. Such military capabilities can only be provided by sponsoring states that, in return, will demand the Boko Haram's active participation in the pursuit of their own strategic and economic objectives. Thus, the pursuit of the Caliphate has already transformed the Boko Haram into an integral part of a larger geo-strategic and geo-economic mega-trend. The long-term threat of the Boko Haram is growing because the Islamic Caliphate in Syria-Iraq provides proof and precedents that establishing a Caliphate against all odds is possible in the 21st Century, and the sponsoring states – Sudan, Iran and Qatar – make this quest possible in the Heart of Africa through their largesse. Hence,



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

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