



The Islamic State in West Africa – Boko Haram Up-Date

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Abstract

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- * In mid-March 2015, the realignment of western African Jihadism with the Islamic Caliphate in al-Jazira was completed as Abubakar Shekau declared his allegiance to Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Caliphate. In late-April, the Caliphate supreme leadership announced the integration of the Boko Haram into the global Jihadist system as “The Islamic State’s West Africa Province” or “The Islamic State in West Africa.”
- * In mid-February, Nigeria and her neighboring Francophone states – Niger, Chad and Cameroon – launched a joint offensive against the Boko Haram’s Caliphate. The allied forces surrounded the entire Caliphate and attacked simultaneously from all directions. The offensive did succeed to put the Boko Haram on the defensive so that they could not disrupt the presidential elections of March 28-29.
- * Starting mid-April, the Boko Haram has been slowly regaining the initiative. The Boko Haram’s counter-offensive and effort to restore their preeminence in northeastern Nigeria has begun. Now anointed as the leading Jihadist movement of western Africa and formally reincarnated as the Islamic State in West Africa – the Boko Haram has no need to rush and take undue risks. The Boko Haram and the Jihadist scourge are not going away anytime soon.

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Analysis

The Boko Haram is on its way to becoming the leading Jihadist entity in western Africa under the auspices of the Islamic Caliphate. The major offensive by the armed forces of Nigeria and its neighbors – Niger, Chad and Cameroon – does not seem to have had any tangible effect on the all-Jihadist standing of the Boko Haram. As well, the Boko Haram is far from being defeated in northeastern Nigeria.

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In mid-March 2015, the realignment of western African Jihadism with the Islamic Caliphate in al-Jazira was completed. On March 8, Abubakar Shekau brought the evolutionary process of the Boko Haram to its logical conclusion and declared his allegiance to Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Caliphate. “We announce our allegiance to the Caliph of the Muslims, Ibrahim ibn Awad ibn Ibrahim al-Husseini al-Qurashi and will hear and obey in times of difficulty and prosperity, in hardship and ease, and to endure being discriminated against, and not to dispute about rule with those in power, except in case of evident infidelity regarding that which there is a proof from Allah,” Shekau declared. “We call on Muslims everywhere to pledge allegiance to the Caliph and support him, as obedience to Allah and as their application of the absent duty of the era.” Shekau stressed that he pledges allegiance to Baghdadi “because there is no cure [for] the dissimilarity” in the Ummah “except in the Caliphate.” He urged all Muslims to pledge allegiance to Baghdadi if only to “enrage the enemy of Allah.”

Shekau now led the Jihadist trend throughout western Africa. In the Sahel, Mokhtar Belmokhtar did not go that far theologically. However, he violated the tacit understanding with the local Francophone governments and struck out at the heart of Bamakao and intentionally killed Westerners. In his claim of responsibility in the name of Katibat al-Murabitun (The Veiled Battalion), Belmokhtar first claimed that the attacks were in reprisal for the French killing of Ahmed al-Tilemsi back in December 2014. In 2013, Tilemsi, a founding member of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), merged MUJWA with Belmokhtar’s forces and formed the Katibat al-Murabitun. Belmokhtar also claimed that the Bamakao attacks also avenged “the Prophet who has been mocked and insulted by the infidel West” through the French Charlie Hebdo magazine.

On March 12, in response to all recent developments and initiatives, the Caliphate’s supreme leadership acknowledged the significance of Shekau’s pledge of allegiance and the centrality of the confrontation with France as announced by Belmokhtar. Abu-Muhammad al-Adnani delivered the KHI’s message in a major statement titled “So They Kill And Are Killed” covering the Caliphate’s world view. “We give you glad tidings today about the expansion of the Caliphate to western Africa, for the Caliph, may Allah preserve him, accepted the pledge of allegiance of our brothers in Jama’at Ahl al-Sunnah Lil Dawa Wal Jihad,” Adnani announced. “So we congratulate the Muslims and our mujahedin brothers in western Africa for their pledge of allegiance, and we congratulate them for their joining the march of the Caliphate.” Adnani urged all Muslims who are “unable to immigrate to Iraq, Sham, Yemen, al-Jazira, and Khorasan,” to ascertain whether they are not “unable [to go to] Africa. We are calling you up for Jihad. Go!”

Adnani highlighted the unique virtues of the Caliphate that now covers the Middle East and western Africa. “O Muslims, come to your [Islamic] State, we urge you to [join the] Jihad, and urge you and call upon you to make hijra [emigration] to your brothers in western Africa. ... Come, O Muslims, to the land of the Caliphate, for it is better for you to be a shepherd in Dar al-Islam [Abode of Islam] than an obeyed master in Dar al-Kufr [Abode of Unbelief].” In the lands of the Caliphate, “monotheism is achieved” because “Jihad in the cause of Allah” is the norm. Adnani noted that there “is no polytheism or paganism or nationalism or patriotism or poly-



theist democracy or disbelieving secularism” throughout the Caliphate. “There is no difference between an Arab and a non-Arab, nor between black and white. Here, the American fraternizes with the Arab, and the African with the European, and the Eastern with the Western.” Adnani emphasized that only in the lands of the Caliphate Muslim can live under the Sharia.

In early-April, the Caliphate elaborated on the historic significance and overall Takfiri Islamist context of the oath of allegiance by the Boko Haram. The analysis in Issue 8 of the Caliphate’s on-line magazine Dabiq set the tone. The cover story of the issue was called “Sharia alone will rule Africa”. The Dabiq Editorial articulated the reasons behind the growth and expansion of the Caliphate throughout the Muslim World. “It was the rejection of nationalism that drove the Islamic State to expand from Iraq into Sham and thereafter to other lands: West Africa, Algeria, Libya, Khurasan, Sinai, Yemen, and the Arabian Peninsula. And it is the rejection of nationalism that will drive the Khilafah to continue expanding until it takes Constantinople and Rome from the Crusaders and their allies by Allah’s permission,” the editorial asserted.

The Dabiq main article analyzed the significance and consequences of the oath of allegiance – bay’ah – by Shekau on behalf of the Boko Haram. “The [Shekau] bay’ah, which came on the heels of a widely successful campaign being waged by the mujahedin across Nigeria and into neighboring regions, was a tremendous cause of celebration for the Muslims and yet another source of gloom for the kuffar.” Still, the supreme leadership of the Caliphate closely studied the qualifications of Shekau and the Boko Haram before accepting them into the fold of the Takfiri Jihadist trend. “Their bay’ah was [ultimately] acknowledged by the Islamic State, and the mujahedin of West Africa now guard yet another frontier of the Khilafah.”

The Dabiq stressed that the expansion of the Caliphate into the Heart of Africa alarmed the governments of both western Africa and the West that they launched a major multinational offensive against the Boko Haram in order to contain the spread of Jihad. This offensive could not contain the Jihadist ascent. “They [the Boko Haram] continue upon this path today under the banner of the Khilafah, even as the forces of kufr redouble their efforts to stop their advance across West Africa, for no sooner had they declared their bay’ah than they were faced with a combined and aggressive air and ground offensive launched by the murtadd forces of Chad and Niger. This is in addition to the troops recently deployed from Cameroon, as well as mercenaries, and even the French crusaders based in Chad, all attempting to stop the mujahedin’s liberation of West Africa.” The KHI’s supreme leadership had no doubt that their African allies would soon prevail and continue the expansion of the Boko Haram Caliphate.

In late-April, the Caliphate supreme leadership announced the further integration of the Boko Haram into the global Jihadist system. On April 24, the KHI released a new video praising the Boko Haram and highlighting the increasingly close relations between them and the Jihadist forces in al-Jazira. The video and related communiques referred to the Boko Haram as “The Islamic State’s West Africa Province.” One of the communiques explained that Baghdadi’s Caliphate was becoming a global movement encompassing provinces all over the Muslim World. The West Africa Province was one of the most important building blocks of the Caliphate. Indeed, 24 and 26 April also saw the first internal communications from northeastern Nigeria to the supreme leadership where the local commanders identified themselves as being part of the “Islamic State in West Africa.”

Meanwhile, the Boko Haram was raising its profile as a regional and all-African force to be reckoned with. Thus, on April 19, the Boko Haram issued a communique vowing revenge for xenophobic attacks on Nigerians in South Africa. In the communique, the Boko Haram gave the Government of South Africa “24 hours to end the



xenophobic attacks” or else the Boko Haram mujahedin “will execute all South Africans living in Nigeria, Chad, Niger and other surrounding countries.” The Boko Haram also threatened to attack South African Embassies in all African countries.

This is not an idle threat. On April 26, the Central Intelligence Organization of Zimbabwe warned that “the Nigerian militant group Boko Haram is in Zimbabwe en route to South Africa.” The Nigerian Jihadists were thought to be on their way to South Africa in order to “carry out revenge attacks for the ill-treatment of several Nigerian nationals in the ongoing xenophobic attacks,” warned Zimbabwe Intelligence. Concurrently, South African security authorities arrested several local Jihadists who were preparing to cooperate with Boko Haram mujahedin once they reached South Africa. One of these South African Jihadists told his interrogator that a contact for the Boko Haram told the South African Jihadists that the Boko Haram “will not permit other nationals to mess up with their brothers and sisters in xenophobic attacks.”

By now, the personal standing of Abubakar Shekau, who was last seen in mid-March, in the global Jihadist leadership might improve markedly. Back in mid-April, rumors began to spread within the Jihadist upper echelons that Mokhtar Belmokhtar was assassinated by poisoning by one of his closest confidants-turned-rivals. According to these reports, Belmokhtar had recently developed a major feud with Ahmed Ould Mohammed al-Khayiri, his second-in-command in Katibat al-Murabitun, over their relations with the Caliphate. Reportedly, al-Khayiri urged Belmokhtar to swear a bay’ah to Baghdadi, but Belmokhtar was reluctant to break all ties with Zawahiri and the Shura Kabira. The Jihadist sources assert that this insistence cost Belmokhtar his life. The actual perpetrator who administered the poison was one of the commanders of the al-Muaqiuq bi-Dam (Those Who Sign in Blood) – an elite splinter group that Belmokhtar had established in 2012 to serve as his personal bodyguards and strike force. Significantly, Algerian Intelligence is still awaiting confirmation of Belmokhtar’s death but claims to be confident that these rumors were true.

Mokhtar Belmokhtar has been the most prominent leader of the Jihadist trend in the Maghreb, the Sahel and the entire western Africa. If he was indeed assassinated, Shekau is the most likely regional candidate to assume Belmokhtar’s standing as the most prominent Jihadist leader and commander in western Africa.

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Meanwhile, the spring of 2015 was not an easy time for the Boko Haram.

In mid-February, Nigeria and her neighboring Francophone states – Niger, Chad and Cameroon – launched a joint offensive against the Boko Haram’s Caliphate. Abuja has paid a heavy political price for the undertaking. France has long argued that Nigeria must not return as a regional power, and that the role belongs to a Francophone alliance. A major part of this Francophone alliance, comprised of the states surrounding Nigeria, is also tasked with stifling the Nigerian ascent. Hence, by accepting the organized regional forces Abuja in effect confirmed the main argument of Paris. Indeed, from the very beginning, France effectively assumed command of the operations of the Francophone forces as part of the French-led Operation Burkhane. Operation Burkhane is being run by French General Jean-Pierre Palasset from the headquarters in the N’Djamena Airbase. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius has overseen the political aspects of the campaign.

At first, French forces performed only non-combat roles such as conducting aerial reconnaissance along Nigeria’s borders with the Francophone states and overseeing the transportation and logistics of the Francophone forces committed to fight against the Boko Haram. However, in early April, French forces joined the fighting when 900 French paratroopers were parachuted into southern Niger in order to block Jihadist reinforcements



and supplies from reaching the Nigerian border. Throughout, Niger-based and Chad-based UAVs (both French and American) provided intelligence overflying northeastern Nigeria.

The allied forces – organized as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF) – surrounded the entire Caliphate and attacked simultaneously from all directions. The Nigerian and allied forces advanced toward the center – Gwaza and the Sambisa Forest. The MJTF forces moved fast and resolutely along the main roads – taking over from the Boko Haram one town after another. There were very few clashes as the Boko Haram forces seemed to have melted away before the arriving forces rather than face combat with superior forces with superior firepower. From the beginning, however, an endemic problem has been that the MJTF forces are minuscule for the size of the Caliphate. Hence, the MJTF does not have any staying power, and the Nigerian authorities have no non-military resources – such as police and paramilitary forces – to take over the towns from the military and reestablish civilian governance. Hence, MJTF forces simply continued their advance, leaving behind the towns they had liberated to their own fate.

The Boko Haram commanders realized this from the very beginning of the offensive. Therefore, the vast majority of Boko Haram forces withdrew into the bush as military columns neared. The Boko Haram forces offered very little fighting or defense. Instead, they waited patiently for the military columns to move on, and quietly made their way back only when they were certain it was safe to reemerge from the bush. Indeed, Boko Haram's casualties and losses of weaponry were very low considering the large size of their forces and arsenals. Only one senior commander – known as Abu-Mujahid – was killed on April 20 in a clash with Nigerian forces on the outskirts of Alagarno, Borno State. All other leaders and commanders, including Shekau, have so far evaded capture or death.

The Nigerian and allied offensive did succeed to put the Boko Haram on the defensive so that they could not disrupt the presidential elections now scheduled for March 28-29. Despite promising to disrupt the elections, the Boko Haram conducted only a small number of attacks in the central North – away from the fighting. The Boko Haram did not inflict heavy casualties or caused heavy damage. However, the overall pace of the Boko Haram's martyrdom bombing was up despite the MJTF offensive. Most of these bombings were hasty. However, a few were well planned and inflicted heavy casualties. For example, in early March, four martyrdom bombers attacked in Maiduguri, Borno State – killing more than 50 people and wounding 140 others.

Starting mid-April, the Boko Haram has been slowly regaining the initiative. At first, Boko Haram forces switched back to localized raids and guerrilla operations against Nigerian and allied small units they deemed vulnerable. Gradually, they expanded raids and bombings not only in Caliphate areas but also deep into Niger, Chad and Cameroon – inflicting anew heavy civilian casualties, instilling terror by public beheading, and returning to the kidnapping of women and children. Throughout the Caliphate area, centralized command and control are being restored slowly. There are indications of concentration of forces and weapons toward the reconstituting of larger units. For example, some of the Boko Haram units that abandoned the cities of Bama, Dikwa, Gwoza and Damboa, all in Borno State, have been converging on meeting points and encampments in Sambisa Forest. Meanwhile, growing numbers of mines and IEDs are being placed along roads used by the MJTF forces – significantly slowing down the movement of forces as well as their ability to hold onto booby-trapped facilities.

On April 24, the Boko Haram launched their first major attack since the beginning of the MJTF offensive. A Boko Haram force of about 2,000 fighters stormed and recaptured Marte, Borno State – a border town on the shore of Lake Chad. The heavily armed fighters attacked from several directions simultaneously, riding speeding vehi-



cles and firing and throwing bombs in all directions. The small garrison of stay-behind Nigerian soldiers fled the town. The next day, another Boko Haram force attacked and seized from Niger's army the strategic island of Karamga in Lake Chad. At dawn, hundreds of Boko Haram fighters arrived aboard motorized canoes and attacked the local troops – inflicting heavy casualties. The Boko Haram then proceeded to slaughter civilians including those who jumped into the water, burn the entire village with many residents burnt alive in their homes, and kidnap a number of women and children. On April 27, a Boko Haram ambush attacked civilians trying to return to Bultaram Village, in the Gujba area of Yobe State, and killed 21 and wounded scores. The Boko Haram fighters warned the survivors not to dare to return to villages vacated during the MJTF offensive before the Boko Haram reclaimed them. Similar warnings are issued in several concentrations of the internally displaced.

This is the beginning of the Boko Haram's counter-offensive and effort to restore their preeminence in north-eastern Nigeria. The Boko Haram leadership is adamant on proving, virtually at all cost, that their new name – "The Islamic State's West Africa Province" or "the Islamic State in West Africa" – is fully warranted. The Jihadist supreme leadership concurs with reports from northeastern Nigeria that the recent offensive of the Nigerian and allied forces was politically motivated – namely, a demonstration of achievements before the presidential elections. Although president-elect Bouhari promised to carry on and even intensify the war against the Boko Haram – the Jihadist leadership is convinced that the campaign against the Boko Haram will be short-lived and half-hearted. Indeed the Nigerian Army announced on April 23 that they were entering the "Final Stages" of their Boko Haram offensive. Therefore, the Jihadist supreme leadership's recommendations for the Boko Haram leaders are to lie low and wait patiently for the pressure to subside before returning to the entire lands so recently claimed by the Caliphate. Now anointed as the leading Jihadist movement of western Africa and formally reincarnated as the Islamic State in West Africa – the Boko Haram has no need to rush and take undue risks. The Boko Haram and the Jihadist scourge are not going away anytime soon.

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



About the Author of this Issue

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.



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