



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

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Executive Summary

- * In May 2015, the Boko Haram, now anointed as the Islamic State in West Africa, continues to consolidate its unique role as the leading Jihadist entity in western Africa under the auspices of the Islamic Caliphate. The role and importance of both Shekau and the Boko Haram continue to rise in the global Jihadist movement irrespective of the on-going offensive.
- * The celebrated offensive by the armed forces of Nigeria and its neighbors has faltered. Far from being defeated in northeastern Nigeria, the Boko Haram already started the recovery process and resumed offensive operations.
- * The Boko Haram assumed a distinct role in the Caliphate's apocalyptic designs for a nuclear strike at the heart of the West. The Islamic State in West Africa is a key to the Caliphate's ability to deliver the epic spectacular strike. This apocalyptic strike will start the demise of the West and the unstoppable ascent of Islam to global dominance. Hence, the Islamic Caliphate will not let go of the crucial asset that the Islamic State in West Africa – that is, the Boko Haram – is without a mighty struggle.

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Analysis

In May 2015, the Boko Haram, now anointed as the Islamic State in West Africa, continues to consolidate its unique role as the leading Jihadist entity in western Africa under the auspices of the Islamic Caliphate. In the process, the Boko Haram assumed a distinct role in the Caliphate's apocalyptic designs for a nuclear strike at the heart of the West. Meanwhile, the celebrated offensive by the armed forces of Nigeria and its neighbors – Niger, Chad and Cameroon – has faltered. Far from being defeated in northeastern Nigeria, the Boko Haram already resumes offensive operations.¹

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In early May, the Boko Haram started the recovery process in the aftermath of the then still unfolding Nigerian and allied offensive. The Boko Haram was particularly hurt by the military's penetration of the vast Sambisa Forest and the destruction of encampments and stockpiles. The Nigerian military freed over a thousand women and girls held hostage with some 90% of them pregnant. Alas, not one of the Chibok girls was discovered. In the Sambisa Forest, the Boko Haram used captive women as human shields. Moreover, some women were even armed and they opened fire on the approaching Nigerian troops.

Colonel Eeben Barlow, the commander of the South African mercenaries who had been involved in the fight against the Boko Haram since early 2015, warned against unrealistic expectations from the brief surge in offensive operations by the Nigerian and allied forces. "The campaign gathered good momentum and wrested much of the initiative from the enemy. It was not uncommon for the strike force to be met by thousands of cheering locals once the enemy had been driven from an area." However, Barlow warned, in the absence of Nigerian staying capacity "the enemy was able to flee the battlefield with some of their forces intact, and will no doubt regroup and continue their acts of terror."

One of the reasons for Boko Haram's ability to evade clashes and redeploy safely was good and timely intelligence. Freed captive women told interrogators that the Boko Haram commanders "usually had inside information on the operations of the Nigerian Army." The commanders "always knew when the soldiers were advancing on them and had enough time to flee with their captives before the troops arrived." Rather than confront the Nigerian and allied forces, the Boko Haram opted to melt away – thus preserving their forces, arsenals and resources. Some women also reported deals with corrupt Nigerian officers. As a result of one such deal in a Sambisa Forest encampment, "the Nigerian Army was not actively killing or arresting them [the Boko Haram forces] but rather relocating them." In other instances, former captive women reported, "Boko Haram terrorists [were] allowed under supervision to flee the forest in convoys without signs of bombs being dropped."

In early May, a reconstituted Boko Haram force estimated at anywhere between 2,000 and 5,000 fighters and auxiliary personnel was detected in new camps at the Niger-Chad border with Nigeria in the Lake Chad region. The build-up accelerated after the successful attack on Marte, Borno State, in late-April. The most important commanders and elite forces built camps on Karamga Island. Consequently, the local Niger authorities urged Lake Chad residents to "evacuate the islands" because of mounting "security fears". By mid-May, the Boko

¹ This paper builds on the author's previous periodic up-dates on the Boko Haram's operations – "Boko Haram – An Analysis of the Latest Developments" (Issue 317, February 2015) and "The Islamic State in West Africa – Boko Haram Up-Date" (Issue 341, April 2015) – as well as the comprehensive analysis "The Boko Haram and Nigerian Jihadism" (Issue 318, February 2015).



Haram forces completed their hold over the town of Marte and began attacking villages in order to expand their safe-zone. The Boko Haram started organizing an assault force for the resumption of the offensive on Maiduguri – the Borno State capital some 110km to the south.

On 13 May, at 18:30 pm, the Boko Haram launched a multi-prong assault on Maiduguri. The primary attack was aimed at the Nigerian Army's Giwa barracks. A few hundred fighters captured a cashew plantation behind Giwa Barracks and shelled the barracks from there for half-an-hour. Concurrently, another Boko Haram force attempted to storm the barracks' gates. They were spearheaded by a female martyrdom bomber who blew herself up near the sentries. At least thirteen people were killed but the main gate was not breached. Exchanges of fire between the defenders and the attackers continued till 5:00 am. Meanwhile, the military and security authorities attempted to rush reinforcements from other parts of Maiduguri. As they neared the Giwa barracks, four female martyrdom bombers attacked them, killing eleven more and stopping the reinforcements from reaching the barracks. Throughout the night, other Boko Haram raiding parties roamed Maiduguri – shooting and bombing indiscriminately and forcing residents into the streets where they blocked the security forces.

Simultaneously, Boko Haram diversionary forces raided the Bale and Kayamla villages at the outskirts of Maiduguri. Several houses were looted and burned by the marauding forces. At least 55-60 people were killed in the two raids. The next day, May 14, the Army once again imposed a 24 hours curfew on Maiduguri. The curfew did not prevent the Boko Haram from setting fire on 16 May to the popular Computer Village Market in Maiduguri. More than a dozen shops selling laptops, mobile phones, accessories and other electronics were destroyed in the fire. The authorities are expecting further escalation of Boko Haram terrorism and raids. Borno State Deputy Governor Zannah Umar Mustapha warns that hundreds of female martyrdom bombers have already slipped into Maiduguri as returning refugees and are poised to strike on order.

Meanwhile, Boko Haram terrorism continues to escalate throughout northeastern Nigeria. On the morning of 8 May, a would-be martyrdom bomber opened fire outside a college in Potiskum, Yobe State, seriously wounding 12 students. He blew himself up when the security forces closed in on him and he ran out of ammunition. On 16 May, a martyrdom bomber killed five and injured fifteen at the Damaturu Central Motor Park, Yobe State. Another female martyrdom bomber killed at least eight people at the Abatcha Market in Damaturu. Multiple bomb explosions caused by left-behind packages were reported all over the Damaturu commercial area. Panic brought all activities to an end.

On 16 May, the Boko Haram resumed major operations in Adamawa State. At least three people were killed and seven women abducted in a Boko Haram overnight raid at Sabongari town. Additional ten people were killed in a subsequent overnight raid on the nearby Ajiya Wagga village. On 19 May, eight people were killed and fourteen were injured when a martyrdom bomber blew himself up outside a crowded livestock market in Garkida village.

On 21 May, Boko Haram raiding parties attacked the Inding and Ropp villages in the Barkin Ladi area of Plateau State – killing 26 civilians and torching several buildings. On 23 May, the Boko Haram raiders struck again in Borno State. Several raiding parties attacked the Gatamwarwa Lehu and Mbulakudika villages in the Chibok and Askira-Uba areas – killing several villagers and torching houses and shops. The raiding parties arrived from, and returned to, the Sambisa Forest – an area ostensibly cleared by the Nigerian military. On 25 May, the Boko Haram further consolidated their deployment around Maiduguri. A raiding force in trucks and on motorcycles



attacked and seized parts of the town of Gubio, 95km from Maiduguri. Other raiding parties roamed through Gubio for six hours, killed several civilians and burned numerous houses. Concurrently, the Boko Haram raided the Kwamda-Kobla village, Adamawa State, killed ten people and inflicted heavy damage to property.

The second half of May finds the Nigerian population exhausted and exasperated. Northern leaders and notables are for the first time calling for amnesty in order to reduce violence and popular recruitment. On 23 May, top northern leaders openly called on the President-elect Muhammadu Buhari to “declare amnesty for Boko Haram insurgents” when he takes office on May 29. The amnesty should be part of a major national program “focusing on rehabilitation, resettlement and reconstruction” throughout the entire North. The northern leaders and notables alluded to a growing loss of faith in a military solution and a hope for a non-violent way out of the crisis in order to alleviate the suffering and hardship of the populace.

On 25 May, the Boko Haram leadership poured cold water on the amnesty initiative. Instead, the Boko Haram sent a defiant message through Ahmad Salkida – a journalist with proven links to the leadership. “Boko Haram is in control of vast territories,” Salkida explained, and thus is under no threat of collapse. “Sadly, this war is far from over and, I am afraid, the worst is yet to come, based on the status quo because Boko Haram is very much in our midst and there is no dialogue or room for amnesty. What is on the table is war and such war can only be won with accountability,” he asserted. “Those still talking about dialogue or amnesty for Boko Haram are not only ignorant of this conflict but are victims of widespread misinformation. Sources said that Shekau was killed, but the reality is that Shekau has not been killed or captured as rumored and over 70 per cent of the Boko Haram leadership and members are still intact.” Salkida expects a dramatic statement from the Boko Haram. “Sources say Shekau has made a video disproving many narratives. The video will reveal the group’s goals and links with [the Islamic State] after facing heavy casualties,” Salkida predicted.

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Meanwhile, the Mokhtar Belmokhtar mystery deepened in mid-May 2015.

Back in mid-April, rumors surfaced that Belmokhtar was poisoned to death. According to these reports, Belmokhtar was feuding 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 allegiance to Baghdadi, but Belmokhtar was reluctant to break all ties with Zawahiri and the Shura Kabira. This insistence reportedly cost Belmokhtar his life.

In mid-May, al-Murabitun announced their allegiance to the Caliphate. “In obedience to the command of Allah ... Jama’at al-Murabitun declares its pledge of allegiance to the Emir of the Believers and the Caliph of the Muslims, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, thereby banishing divisions and dissent within the Nation.” The communiqué urged “all Jihadi movements to pledge allegiance [to al-Baghdadi] in order to speak with one voice.” Significantly, the announcement was read by Adnan Abou Walid Sahraoui and did not mention who was the al-Murabitun leader who actually swore the bay’ah to Baghdadi. Sahraoui is not part of the central Shura. In the past, he issued several claims of responsibility for Jihadist operations and kidnappings in northern Mali – Azawad – in the name of both the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and al-Murabitun. He has never been associated with regional and theological issues.

The next day, the Jihadist media published a written statement from Belmokhtar in which he rejected and denied the pledge of allegiance to Baghdadi and the Caliphate. “After the message addressed in the name of



al-Murabitun which dealt with the bay'ah to Baghdadi, we announce, this does not abide by the terms and covenants of the Shura of the organization." Sahraoui's claim "clearly violates the founding statement, which identified the approach and behavior of the organization. As such, this does not represent the Shura of al-Murabitun." Belmokhtar's statement then reaffirmed his allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahri.

Belmokhtar's statement as published was a printed text over the name of Khalid Abu al-Abbas, a *nom de guerre* of Belmokhtar. The statement was computer generated and lacked even the most basic signature. Hence, it is hard to verify the authenticity of the statement. The statement cannot, therefore, constitute a confirmation that Belmokhtar is still alive.

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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Throughout, the role and importance of both Shekau and the Islamic State in West Africa continued to rise in the global Jihadist movement despite the on-going offensive by the armed forces of Nigeria and its neighbors. The Boko Haram – that is, the Islamic State in West Africa – is now addressed in the context of global Jihad and not just African affairs.

Around 13 May, the Boko Haram suffered its first confirmed combat fatalities in the Middle East. At least five Boko Haram fighters were killed in combat with Kurdish forces in the Mosul area, northern Iraq. They were part of a distinct Boko Haram squad. The squad answered to an elite unit of the Islamic Caliphate forces largely comprised of international volunteers undergoing expert training before returning to their home countries. Part of this training program is to acquire battlefield experience. Local Kurdish commander Saed Mamuzini affirmed that "The Nigerian Boko Haram militants were in Mosul to take part in a military training course conducted by the Islamic State."

The new role of Shekau and the Islamic State in West Africa were depicted in mid-May in Issue 9 of Dabiq, the on-line magazine of the Islamic Caliphate. The lead article, called "The Perfect Storm", addresses the evolution and prospects of the Caliphate and Takfiri Jihadism in global context.

The swift ascent and spread of the Jihadist Trend as spearheaded by the Caliphate is threatening Western world order to such an extent that a fateful clash with the West is all but inevitable and imminent, the Dabiq argues. "The pledges of allegiance that are now being announced on a seemingly monthly basis from Islamic groups around the world to the Islamic State are ... a nightmare scenario for the military and political leaders of the democratic world. The incredible growth of the Caliphate and the fact that it is a living, breathing entity with thousands of square miles of territory has given Muslims around the Middle East, Asia, and Africa the belief and confidence to take up arms, pledge their loyalty, and launch operations with a unity and strength of purpose that has simply not been seen before." The Caliphate's ability to transform into an Islamic State controlling territory worldwide makes it a new and unprecedented threat to the West. "What started as the most explosive Islamic 'group' in the modern world has rapidly evolved into the most explosive Islamic movement the modern world has ever seen. ... Huge swathes of Pakistan, Nigeria, Libya, Yemen, and the Sinai Peninsula are all now united under the black flag of Tawhid, gelled together as one by the Islamic State."



Sooner rather than later, the Dabiq predicts, the US-led West will strive to contain and destroy the Caliphate and the Message of Jihad. There will then emerge the need to strike unprecedented fear at the heart of the entire Western world through the use of apocalyptic weapons. The detonation of a nuclear bomb at the heart of America is the preferable strike. The Dabiq author pontificates:

“Let me throw a hypothetical operation onto the table. The Islamic State has billions of dollars in the bank, so they call on their wilayah [province] in Pakistan to purchase a nuclear device through weapons dealers with links to corrupt officials in the region. The weapon is then transported overland until it makes it to Libya, where the mujahedin move it south to Nigeria. Drug shipments from Columbia bound for Europe pass through West Africa, so moving other types of contraband from East to West is just as possible. The nuke and accompanying mujahedin arrive on the shorelines of South America and are transported through the porous borders of Central America before arriving in Mexico and up to the border with the United States. From there it’s just a quick hop through a smuggling tunnel and *hey presto*, they’re mingling with another 12 million ‘illegal’ aliens in America with a nuclear bomb in the trunk of their car.

“Perhaps such a scenario is far-fetched but it’s the sum of all fears for Western intelligence agencies and it’s infinitely more possible today than it was just one year ago. And if not a nuke, what about a few thousand tons of ammonium nitrate explosive? That’s easy enough to make. The Islamic State make no secret of the fact they have every intention of attacking America on its home soil and they’re not going to mince about with two mujahedin taking down a dozen casualties if it originates from the Caliphate. They’ll be looking to do something big, something that would make any past operation look like a squirrel shoot, and the more groups that pledge allegiance the more possible it becomes to pull off something truly epic. ... Perhaps once there was a chance that an attack inside the West or on Western borders by the Islamic State could be averted through negotiations, but no longer. As the territory of the Islamic State crosses from one border to another like a wildfire that is burning out of control, it’ll be only a matter of time before the Islamic State reaches the Western world.”

Thus, as Dabiq articulates, the Islamic State in West Africa is one of the keys to the Caliphate’s ability to deliver the epic spectacular strike at the heart of the US and the West. This apocalyptic strike will start the demise of the West and the unstoppable ascent of Islam to global dominance. Hence, the Islamic Caliphate will not let go of the crucial asset that the Islamic State in West Africa – that is, the Boko Haram – is without a mighty struggle.

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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