



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

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August 2015

Executive Summary

- * By mid-summer 2015, the Boko Haram has seized anew the strategic and tactical initiatives throughout northeastern Nigeria and adjacent areas. The Boko Haram defined the war as befitting the Jihadists' goals and capabilities - and is now winning it.
- * The greatest pain is inflicted by the new clandestine-underground command under Khalid al-Barnawi that wages guerrilla-terrorism war through a wave of extremely lethal suicide bombings throughout northern Nigeria and into the neighboring states.
- * On 16 August, Shekau reappeared via an audio message in which he reasserted his position as the leader of the Islamic State in West Africa.
- * Mokhtar Belmokhtar resurfaced in late-July in the context of the establishment of the Qaidat Jihad in West Africa under the banner of al-Murabitoun.
- * As the Middle East is descending into an apocalyptic carnage with no end in sight, the uppermost Jihadist leaderships - both the traditional al-Qaida and the Islamic State/Caliphate - increasingly focus on western Africa as a zone of achievements. The ongoing Jihadization of these conflicts - fueled by the Jihadist operations in Libya and Nigeria - might soon enable the Jihad to begin the takeover of western Africa.

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Analysis

On 29 May 2015, Muhammadu Buhari was sworn as the new President of Nigeria. The ongoing, escalating and debilitating war against the Boko Haram has now become his responsibility.¹

Since then, despite international cooperation and the impact of the brief offensive launched by previous President Goodluck Jonathan, the security situation in Nigeria and the pertinent adjacent states - Niger, Chad and Cameroon - has markedly deteriorated. Rather than confront heavy forces with superior firepower - the Boko Haram forces abandoned cities and other locations where they were likely to be trapped and destroyed. The Boko Haram's control over these cities was tenuous at best and exercised through arrangements with local notables. It was more that the Nigerian government was evicted from these places after brief clashes than the Boko Haram was holding onto them. Thus, cognizant that the government forces had no staying power - the Boko Haram preferred to avoid losses and instead focus on preparing for a big comeback.

By mid-summer 2015, the Boko Haram has seized anew the strategic and tactical initiatives throughout northeastern Nigeria and adjacent areas. The Boko Haram defined the new war as befitting the Jihadists' goals and capabilities - and is now winning it. Much of the dramatic improvement and sophistication can be attributed to the expert advice received from the Islamic State. They encouraged the Boko Haram to switch from holding cities and towns to waging a mobile guerrilla and terrorism war. Indeed, the forces of the Islamic State in West Africa clearly dictate the place and pace of the war. Moreover, the Jihad of the Islamic State in West Africa is now regional. The Jihadist insurrection has become more entrenched and spread into new regions across the Nigerian border. The first objective is to resurrect the historic Islamic Emirate of Borno that covered parts of contemporary Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. In the first phase, the Islamic State in West Africa is focused on a region of about 260,000 SqKm (compared to the total of 180,000 SqKm the Boko Haram was both controlling and partially controlling at its territorial peak in late-2014 and early-2015).

Concurrently, the key Boko Haram forces keep reorganizing and rebuilding. The flow of military supplies and expert Jihadists from both north and east remains virtually uninterrupted. The systemic core in northeastern Nigeria already adapted to the new realities. Larger stockpiles of weapons and ammunition were broken into smaller caches and were dispersed and hidden in the forests and bush - making them harder to detect and bomb from the air. The large distinct combat vehicles such as tanks and heavy artillery that can be detected by drones and from space were separated from the main forces and, at times, burnt and discarded.

Most important, the leadership and high-command remained intact under Abubakar Shekau. However, in order to adapt to the prevailing circumstances, Shekau divided the high command into two distinct branches - the main forces of the Islamic State in West Africa that remain under Shekau's personal command and a separate clandestine-underground command for the conduct of terrorism war under Khalid al-Barnawi. That underground command is said by Jihadist leaders to be so good and anonymous that al-Barnawi himself, as well as his key commanders and operatives, "frequently go incognito among civilians" in their main target cities without the fear of being identified. Shekau and his key senior commanders operate in small teams that meet only infrequently. Most of them hide in caves in the mountains in eastern Adamawa State close to the Nigeria-Cameroon border. They exercise their communications via messengers who access computers and

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), "The Islamic State in West Africa – Boko Haram Up-Date" (Issue 341, April 2015), and "The Islamic State in West Africa – Boko Haram Up-Date II" (Issue 349, May 2015) - as well as the comprehensive analysis "The Boko Haram and Nigerian Jihadism" (Issue 318, February 2015).



telephony in major cities.

The main Boko Haram mobile forces already regrouped in the forests and mountains along the border with Cameroon. There are between 6,000 and 7,500 highly trained and well equipped fighters in this area. In addition, some 5,000 quality fighters have melted into local population centers in further afield areas. They are moving around in small teams as internally dispersed refugees, traveling merchants and even beggars. They reconstitute base-camps and periodically raid in small formations not exceeding a few hundred fighters. The Boko Haram suffered major losses of manpower among the various auxiliary forces. Most of the over 5,000 boy-soldiers remain loyal and are making their way to the Cameroon border area. Only between 7,500 and 10,000 locally recruited volunteers remain and most of these are dispersed in further away areas so that their contribution to the war effort is currently marginal. There are only a few thousand forced recruits that provide technical and logistical services. (In Winter 2014/15, the Boko Haram fielded between 15,000 and 20,000 highly trained and well equipped fighters, about 15,000 locally recruited volunteers, about 10,000 forced recruits, and over 5,000 boy-soldiers.)

The key forces of the Boko Haram learned to better immerse themselves in their surroundings. The main high-quality fighting forces are deployed in rural and semi-rural areas where they can disperse and merge quickly, thus avoiding major clashes with the military. Force preservation and survival are declared objectives - albeit not at the expense of destroying the enemy. The new circumstances required changing and adapting the key tactics. Decision is achieved by the simultaneous convergence of numerous small units arriving separately from hidden base-camps. They attack the Nigerian and allied military forces from two or three directions simultaneously. The Boko Haram's objective is to compel the military forces to maneuver, withdraw and reorganize. However, the Boko Haram forces rarely remain for this maneuver to be completed. They scoot back quickly. Meanwhile, however, another major Boko Haram grouping is awaiting in ambush positions in the areas they expect the Nigerian and allied military forces to maneuver to - surprising them with a sudden quick strike where and when they least expect the Boko Haram to be. These new tactics require sophisticated planning, excellent intelligence, nimbleness of forces, and, most important, uninterrupted command, control and communications for the coordination of the various strike forces. All of these traits have markedly improved during the summer of 2015.

The greatest pain is inflicted by the new clandestine-underground command under Khalid al-Barnawi. Significantly, Shekau trusts Barnawi with the command of the most sensitive arm of the Islamic State in West Africa despite his history of close relations with Mokhtar Belmokhtar and the al-Qaida elites both in Africa and Afghanistan-Pakistan. The new command has put the security forces once again on the defensive - reacting to a wave of extremely lethal suicide bombings throughout northern Nigeria and into the neighboring states. Shekau and Barnawi accepted the recommendations of the visiting experts of the IS/KHI that the Boko Haram should focus on a strategy of urban terrorism, making roads untrafficable, and overall guerrilla warfare aimed to alienate the local population against the authorities.

At the core of Barnawi's command and the key to his success is a group of veteran experts that have followed him for decades - some even preceding his Ansaru days. Some of these Jihadist old-timers fought in the ranks of the LIFG in Libya in the 1990's, in Algeria in the 1990's-2000's, and in the ranks of the ISI in Iraq in the 2000's. Most of the Jihadist commanders who spent the early-2000's in training in Sudan and in Somalia, as well as a few veterans of the Jihad in Sudan-Chad (both in the South and in Darfur) and even in Afghanistan in the 1980's-1990's, gravitated around Barnawi. They constitute an excellent knowledge base for the building of



clandestine networks and the sustenance of a guerrilla-terrorism war. In early summer, Barnawi and his team of experts completed the initial plans for a relentless campaign of terrorism. Their ultimate objective is to force Nigeria and its allies - Chad, Niger and Cameroon - on the strategic-political defensive through spectacular terrorist strikes, including against major economic and political objectives, in Abuja, Lagos, and other regional capitals and cities.

Barnawi's first step was to establish a network of command cells spread across the region. This network is quite like the Jamaat-style networks of cells run by the followers of the IS/KHI in the North Caucasus, Central Asia, the Balkans, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, etc. These Jamaat-style networks of cells have proven nearly impossible to penetrate and destroy by security forces. In Barnawi's networks, each cell is comprised of four-five senior Jihadists - many of whom are veterans of Libya and Iraq. They are older, patient and prudent. They bring along their wives and children so that they can better vanish in the urban areas and the camps of internally displaced refugees. The cells operate autonomously and in isolation in order to maximize operational security. The Jihadist commanders maintain their own financial and logistics pipelines separately in order to ensure their secrecy. Hence, even if one cell is exposed - the others remain unknown and secure. Once a cell is considered safe, the Jihadists start to recruit locally and/or handle recruits sent their way. They indoctrinate their would-be martyr-bombers, impose security and discipline, and build the bombs for them locally. Periodically, Barnawi sends his cell commanders only general directives regarding strategic objectives and time-frames. To ensure security, the local Jihadist commanders have complete control over the specific targets and exact timing of strikes.

For symbolic political reasons, the first operation in the campaign took place on May 30 - the day after Buhari was sworn in. The message was punishment for the northern Muslims who voted for the "infidel" and support him. A male martyr-bomber detonated himself inside a mosque in central Maiduguri, Borno State, killing 26 and injuring more than 30. The bomb was powerful and leveled the mosque.

The campaign escalated at the start of Ramadan in mid-June in accordance with the global directive of the IS/KHI to increase attacks on Muslims who reject Takfiri Islamism during Ramadan. On the first day of Ramadan, a sack of bombs killed more than 60 people in Bauchi, Bauchi State. A couple of days later, two martyrdom-bombers struck the police academy and police headquarters in N'Djamena - killing 34 people and wounding over a hundred. Horseback and motorbike-mounted raiders threw bombs into crowds in Niger marketplaces. A week later, a 12-year-old girl detonated herself at a market in Yobe State - killing at least ten people.

A major escalation started the following week. It began with an operational slip-up. On the night of 1 July, six female martyr-bombers killed scores of civilians in separate attacks in the village of Zabamari Muna near Maiduguri. There are no viable targets in the village - let alone for six bombers. Apparently, the six were being primed for martyrdom operations in Maiduguri but could not wait for their allotted time. On the night of 3 July, a teen-age martyr-bomber blew herself up in a mosque in Malari - killing twelve worshipers. There followed that night a slew of smaller bombings inside mosques all over northern Nigeria that caused nearly 150 fatalities and close to a thousand wounded. On 7 July, an adult female martyr-bomber killed over twenty government workers in Zaria when she blew herself in their midst. A would-be accomplice blew herself up harmlessly after she was stopped at a roadblock in Zaria.

On 12 July, two female martyr-bombers killed at least a dozen in the Cameroon border town of Fotokol. The same day, a martyr-bomber blew herself up in a crowded market in N'Djamena - killing over 15 people and



injuring 75 more. Another bombing campaign against mosques took place on 16-17 July. On 16 July, a young female martyr-bomber killed at least ten worshipers celebrating Eid al-Fitr in a Damaturu mosque. The next night, two female martyr-bombers - a ten-year-old and an elderly woman - killed 50 people in separate attacks in Damaturu. A market in Gombe was hit by twin bomb attacks killing over 40. By mid-July, bombs were also detonated in the major cities of Jos and Kano - the first such attacks since February 2015. By 20 July, the end of Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr, more than 500 predominantly Muslim civilians were killed, and a few thousand were wounded, by Barnawi's bombers.

The bombing throughout the areas claimed by the Islamic State in West Africa continue. On 22 July, two girl martyr-bombers killed at least twenty people in Maroua, Cameroon. On 25 July, a 12-year-old martyr-bomber blew herself up in a popular bar in Cameroon - killing twenty more. On 26 July, a mature martyr-bomber blew herself up in a crowded market in Damaturu - killing 14 and wounding 60. On 11 August, a female martyr-bomber exploded herself inside a market in Maiduguri - killing at least 47 and wounding at least 52. Meanwhile, smaller bombs, mostly left in carts, sacks and bags, keep blowing up on a daily basis - each causing a few fatalities and wounded, but adding to a growing public tension, mistrust, and exhaustion.

Moreover, the first few martyrdom bombs in N'Djamena were a harbinger of bigger things to come. For example, the use of burqa-clad male martyrdom bombers in N'Djamena, Niamey, and other cities intended and succeeded to elicit harsh crackdown by the security authorities on all burqa-clad women - thus further alienating conservative Islamist tribes who are now providing active help to the Jihadists in their midst. Similarly, the use of fishing carts to hide bombs in the Lake Chad area resulted in a major crackdown in all four states on fishermen bringing fish to local markets. Frustrated with their fish and carts being destroyed by the security forces - the local fishermen communities have also increased their support for the Jihadists.

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Meanwhile, the Jihadist spread into western Africa has intensified with all aspirant powers courting the key local Jihadist leaders including Abubakar Shekau, Khalid al-Barnawi and the rest of their high command. The endorsement of the Caliphate was manifested in lavishly produced video messages that were widely circulated throughout the entire Muslim World.

On 11 July, the Caliphate released the first major video for the Islamic State in West Africa. The ten-minute video starts with scenes of firefights against Nigerian soldiers in Borno and Yobe. Boko Haram fighters are shown standing proudly next to the scorched bodies of Nigerian troops and showing their security badges. The video ends with the decapitation of a captured soldier. The man is made to kneel in front of three masked Boko Haram fighters. It then shows his decapitated body lying on the ground. The narration of the video stressed that the Boko Haram was a viable fighting force confronting and defeating the "apostate" forces.

A second eight-minute video was released on 3 August. The video started with combat scenes showing fighters attacking a security checkpoint, seizing weapons, and blowing up stuff. The video then shows part of the Boko Haram's MBT, APC and Artillery arsenal. An unidentified young man appears among crates of ammunition ostensibly captured from the enemy and speaks in the name of the Islamic State in West Africa. A hooded fighter stands behind him holding the Caliphate's black flag. The address was in Hausa language with the Caliphate providing Arabic subtitles. "Dear brothers, exercise patience as we face the Nigerian army and African Union," the speaker said. "Your brothers fought against the tawaghit [infidelity] by attacking their barracks. They were very many, but we killed many of them." He urged the listeners not to believe reports of



withdrawals and setbacks. “We are still present everywhere we had been before,” the speaker assured. He concluded by urging the listeners to join the Jihad. “Don’t be lazy. Fight - give your blood to Allah!” The video concluded with the decapitation of a Nigerian Police Officer.

Shekau did not participate in these videos and seemingly vanished. In reality, he “vanished” when his Thuraya satellite telephone went off the air. The reporting in Raqqah about the activities of the Islamic State in West Africa left no doubt Shekau is still in charge and capable of directly managing the Jihad. Shekau would have remained silent but for an August 12 provocation by Chad’s President Idriss Deby who insisted that Shekau was deposed and that a new leader was ready for cease-fire and negotiations.

Deby identified the successor as “Mahamat Daoud” - actually, Muhammad Daud. French and Chadian intelligence claim that Muhammad Daud is the speaker in the August 3 video. He is 38 years old, a Shuwa Arab from Maiduguri with a Kanambu mother from Chad. He served briefly in the army and then became a trader in perfumes. Daud is identified as one of the earliest students of Muhammad Yusuf but there is no record of him among Yusuf’s original “Nigerian Taliban”. Daud is described as Imam of the Science of Hadith. According to Chad intelligence, Daud is in charge of the Boko Haram’s Amniyah [Security] Department responsible for counter-intelligence and internal security. Beforehand, Daud was in charge of the training of martyrdom-bombers, planning their operations, selecting of targets, etc. in Maiduguri and all other major cities. Daud also ran an intelligence unit responsible for collecting the hundreds of millions of naira in ransom from Nigerian VIPs for not exploding bombs in specific states.

According to Chad intelligence, the reason for Daud’s breaking with Shekau is long-term profound ideological disagreements. Already in 2009, he disagreed with the plan for uprising because the Jihadists were not ready. He remained “a staunch Yusufi” who opposed Shekau’s “polarizing policies”. Daud confronted Shekau over the pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State and Baghdadi because this was “a betrayal of the teachings of Muhammad Yusuf.” Daud was too strong for Shekau to purge. Now, with Boko Haram collapsing, Daud is adamant on saving northeastern Nigeria through negotiations.

In reality, Mahamat Daoud has never been as senior as claimed by Deby and was nowhere near taking over the Boko Haram. Most of the positions attributed to Daud have been Barnawi’s. The August 12 announcement by Chad’s President Idriss Deby was a desperate attempt on behalf of French President Francois Hollande to provide a cover and an excuse for the Francophone Africans’ abandoning a war Paris is convinced to be unwinnable in favor of some mediation and negotiations.

Shekau, however, could not ignore the challenge from N’Djamena, and, on 16 August, issued an eight-minute Hausa-language audio message. Shekau called Idriss Deby a “hypocrite” and a “tyrant” who invented the story of Shekau’s replacement for his own self-interest with the West. “It is indeed all over the global media of the infidels that I am dead or that I am sick and incapacitated and have lost influence in the affairs of religion,” Shekau said. “It should be understood that this is false. This is indeed a lie. If it were true, my voice wouldn’t have been heard, now that I am speaking.” He reiterated that his fate was in the hands of Allah and not mortals. “Gratitude be to Allah and with his help, I have not disappeared. I am still alive and I am not dead. And I will not die until my time appointed by Allah is up.” Shekau emphasized that he was still “the leader of the West Africa wing” of the Islamic State and reiterated his fealty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi “the Caliph of Muslims”. Shekau then taunted President Muhammadu Buhari and his recent promise to defeat the Boko Haram within three months. “This ostentatious person, a liar - I mean Buhari, who raised arms to crush us in three months. You Buhari, why didn’t you say in three years?” Shekau mocked. “We will certainly fight you by



the grace of Allah until we establish Allah’s law everywhere on Earth.” Shekau concluded with a defiant challenge to all his foes. “Here I am, alive. I will only die the day Allah takes my breath.”

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Concurrently, the traditional al-Qaida also intensified its spread into western Africa in an effort to balance the ascent of Shekau’s Islamic State in West Africa. Most important is the disappearance and reemergence of Mokhtar Belmokhtar and the new Qaidat Jihad in Western Africa. He disappeared in mid-April in the midst of rumors of poisoning. Belmokhtar resurfaced in late-July 2015 in the context of profound changes in the al-Qaida affiliated networks throughout northern Africa under the banner of al-Murabitoun.

First, a veteran Jihadist commander Abu Omar al-Muhajir al-Masri announced the emergence of an al-Murabitoun branch in eastern Libya and western Egypt. Abu Omar al-Muhajir al-Masri (real name Hisham Ali Ashmawi) is a veteran Egyptian Special Forces officer who defected to join the Jihad and spent time fighting in both Syria and Libya. He swore allegiance to Zawahiri. Under Abu Omar al-Muhajir al-Masri, the al-Murabitoun joins the Jihad in Burma, Palestine, Iraq, Syria and Egypt. However, the primary objective of this branch of al-Murabitoun is to restore Islamic rule over Egypt. “Egypt is overpowered by the new pharaoh Sisi, and by his soldiers and sorcerers, so that he can follow the path of his ancestor Pharaoh,” Abu Omar al-Muhajir al-Masri declared. The Jihadist elite forces of al-Murabitoun come from the ranks of Egyptians and Cyrenaicans being trained in the Derna Emirate and southern Libya.

The announcement of Abu Omar al-Muhajir al-Masri’s al-Murabitoun branch preceded the almost concurrent announcement of a profound transformation of the Jihadist forces in the entire region. First came a bland communique reiterating that Belmokhtar was indeed alive and still in command of al-Murabitoun. Of importance, however, were the page’s header and footer which carried the identifier “Al-Murabitoun - Qaidat Jihad in West Africa.” Furthermore, the page carried the Black Banner now commonly associated with the IS/KHI. Another communique followed in mid-August, stating that the Shurah of al-Murabitoun selected Mokhtar Belmokhtar to serve as their leader. Ultimately, the quiet announcement of the “Al-Murabitoun - Qaidat Jihad in West Africa” by the al-Qaida-affiliated Jihadist movement aims first and foremost at countering the Caliphate’s establishment of an African entity - the “Islamic State in West Africa” - anchored in Boko Haram’s northeastern Nigeria. It is increasingly imperative for Zawahiri’s Shurah Kabirah to project the image of al-Qaida as a still viable global Jihadist trend.

Mokhtar Belmokhtar thus remains the most prominent leader of the Jihadist trend in the Maghreb, the Sahel and the entire western Africa. However, he remains fiercely loyal to Ayman al-Zawahiri. Thus, as the Islamic State/Caliphate is rising to become the preeminent Jihadist trend in the entire region - Shekau is the most likely regional candidate to gradually replace Belmokhtar’s standing as the most prominent Jihadist leader and commander in western Africa.

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As the Middle East is descending into an apocalyptic carnage with no end in sight, the uppermost Jihadist leaderships - both the traditional al-Qaida and the Islamic State/Caliphate - increasingly focus on western Africa as a zone of achievements. Moreover, the growing flow of illegal migrants across the Mediterranean into Europe provides opportunities for infiltrating operatives. This requires control of both the manpower pools in western Africa and the ports of embarkation on the Libyan coast. These are indeed the main areas of intensified Jihadist operations - mainly by the Islamic State/Caliphate.



Thus, the ascent of the Islamic State in West Africa is escalating anew and spreading throughout Africa. The Boko Haram forces are becoming more effective and lethal as growing numbers of Nigerian and other African veterans return with skills and expertise from the Middle East. Caliph al-Baghdadi and the supreme leadership of the Islamic State/Caliphate are very satisfied with the performance of Shekau and the other leaders of the Islamic State in West Africa as reflected in the growing volume of propaganda and incitement videos and audio-tapes posted by the center highlighting the Islamic State in West Africa.

The future does not bode well for Nigeria and the other pro-Western states of western Africa. Both the traditional al-Qaida and the Islamic State/Caliphate are increasingly sophisticated, pragmatic and knowledgeable. They are better tuned to the importance of tribal and national dynamics throughout Africa - even in the quest for doctrinarian Islamist entities. Hence, the regionalization of the war against the Boko Haram provides the Jihadist leaders with the opening for exploiting the outreach, frustrations and violence of the main nations stretching across western Africa from east to west - the Tuaregs and Berbers by Qaidat Jihad in West Africa and the Fulani by the Islamic State in West Africa. The ongoing Jihadization of these conflicts - fueled by the Jihadist operations in Libya and Nigeria respectively - might soon enable the Jihad to begin the takeover of western Africa.

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

About the Author of this Issue

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