

Islamic State and West Africa

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2015 marked the year when "Boko Haram" evolved from an ostensibly domestic-rooted and globally unaffiliated militant group into a "Province" in the Islamic State's global structure. This transition was formalized on March 7, 2015, when "Boko Haram" leader Abubakr Shekau pledged baya'a, or allegiance, to the Islamic State caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Vanguard, March 7). In the ensuing weeks, al-Baghdadi's spokesman accepted Shekau's pledge, the Islamic State publicized Shekau's pledge in its official magazine Dabiq and other Islamic State "Provinces" in Algeria, Yemen, Libya, Syria and Iraq issued ten videos of congratulations for Shekau's pledge (Nigeria News, March 12).

The ten videos of congratulations are the highest number of videos that the Islamic State has released on any theme or issue since al-Baghdadi's declaration of the caliphate in May 2014. This was a testament to the significance to the Islamic State of "Boko Haram," which was renamed the "Islamic State in West Africa Province," or ISWAP. ISWAP became the Islamic State's largest acquisition outside of the Middle East and furthered the narrative that the Islamic State was remaining (baqiya, in Arabic) in Syria and Iraq and expanding (tatamadad, in Arabic) globally, especially in Africa.

Why and How Shekau Made the Pledge

The most likely explanation for Shekau's pledge to al-Baghdadi is that Shekau has long yearned for an "Islamic State" to replace the federal, secular, democratic, Anglophone and constitutionally established state of Nigeria. Shekau was willing to declare himself "subservient" to al-Baghdadi and even respect an al-Baghdadi-appointed amir for "West Africa Province," who is reportedly an Arab based in Libya, in order to receive legitimacy for his "Province" in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region (Fulan's SITREP, September 17). Shekau also likely benefitted from reconciliation with former "al-Qaeda in Nigeria" militants, who publicly referred to themselves as "Ansaru" after Ansaru announced its formation in 2012 and, at that time, expressed its opposition to Shekau's takfiri ideology.

After Ansaru's disintegration in 2013, U.S.-designated terrorist Khalid al-Barnawi's forces began to operate alongside Shekau's forces, mostly in northern Cameroon. There, al-Barnawi's militants have controlled key logistical and smuggling routes, masterminded the kidnapping-for-ransom of 22 foreigners and caused significant casualties to Cameroon's Rapid Intervention Brigades (BIR) and Chadian forces (and arguably hastened their departure from Cameroon in November 2015) as well as the civilian population

(Terrorism Monitor, February 6). It was these former Ansaru militants under al-Barnawi who likely:

Reconnected with their former North African al-Qaeda comrades who had defected from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to the Islamic State; and

Through these North Africans, opened up the line of communication between Shekau and Libya- and Tunisia-based Islamic State militants who report, and in some cases travel, to Raqqa, Syria.

The relationship between Shekau and North African AQIM defectors to the Islamic State paved the way for Shekau's pledge to al-Baghdadi and for al-Baghdadi's forces in Raqqa in Syria to recognize the pledge.

Islamic State Influence on ISWAP

In the year leading up to Shekau's pledge on March 7, 2015-and in the nine months after the pledge-the most visible area of Islamic State influence on ISWAP has been in ISWAP's strategic communication, which is fully integrated into the production and dissemination style on social media of all Islamic State Provinces. ISWAP's media wing is accordingly called "West Africa Province Media Foundation."

Yet, there are three other strategic areas where Islamic State influence on ISWAP may also be seen. These three areas are:

ISWAP's decision, for the first time, to hold territory in northeastern Nigeria, starting in mid-2014 when Shekau was first beginning to signal his impending allegiance to al-Baghdadi. [1]

ISWAP's expansion, activation of cells and escalation of attacks in Nigeria's neighboring West African countries of Niger, Cameroon and Chad after the start of regional military intervention in northeastern Nigeria in February 2015, including a trademark tactic of deploying teenage girls in suicide attacks in those countries. [2]

ISWAP's target selection within Nigeria, including a claimed suicide attack on a Shi'a procession in Kano in November 2015, three claimed suicide attacks in Abuja in October 2015 and four claimed suicide attacks in N'djamena, Chad in June 2015 (Terrorism Monitor, February 6). [3]

There is debate in the analytical community about the extent to which the Islamic State influenced the above three strategic areas. Before Shekau's pledge, one of the most credible and closely connected Nigerian journalists to ISWAP, the exiled Ahmed Salkida, suggested that the Islamic State was offering funds to "Boko Haram" to make the pledge like the Islamic State did to other militant groups, which makes it possible that some Islamic State funds-in addition to ransom money that al-Barnawi's forces receiving for their kidnappings in Cameroon-contributed to some of these above-mentioned ISWAP operations in 2014 and 2015 (Storify.com, November 1, 2014). Nonetheless, it is beyond reasonable doubt that the Islamic State contributed directly to ISWAP's strategic communication to "market" those operations, especially to the Islamic State's online English, Arabic and French-speaking followers (but not necessarily Hausa-speaking Nigerians).

For example:

When ISWAP began to occupy territories in northeastern Nigeria in mid-2014, Shekau declared that the region was part of an "Islamic State (dawla Islamiya or dawlat al-Islam)" several times in videos, which carried the "signatures" of Islamic State choreography, special effects, music, clothing, symbols (such as flags), terminology and rhetoric from Islamic State's own videos from Syria and Iraq, and Libya (YouTube, August 24, 2014; YouTube, October 5, 2014; YouTube, November 1, 2014; YouTube, November 10, 2014). [4]

ISWAP began to operate its own official twitter account called al-Urhwa al-Wutqha with the pro-Islamic State, Algeria- and Tunisia-based, and Islamic State-endorsed Africa Media organization in early 2015, and released "letters" to Africa Media on developments in northeastern Nigeria, including one about the prospective pledge, while Africa Media encouraged the use of French language on al-Urhwa al-Wutqha and even appeared to have co-written a threat to neighboring West Africa countries on ISWAP's behalf

that was posted on al-Urhwa al-Wutqha.

ISWAP has only claimed three sets of attacks since Shekau's pledge to al-Baghdadi-the attacks on the Shi'a procession in Kano, military and police facilities in N'djamena and markets in Abuja-which suggests that the Islamic State, which disseminated the claims on ISWAP's behalf, was likely specifically informed of and interested in claiming those attacks because they are the types of targets in city capitals or against enemies, such as Shi'a, that the Islamic State would want ISWAP to publicize as part of the organization's branding of ISWAP's militancy.

While the Islamic State has long approved of Shekau's style of takfiri violence and has defended, in particular, the kidnappings in Chibok of more than 200 mostly Christian schoolgirls in April 2014, the Islamic State is now "re-packaging" ISWAP to serve and fit the template that the Islamic State "core" in Syria and Iraq envisions for all Provinces (Dabiq4, October 2014). This does not necessarily require the Islamic State to radically change how ISWAP operates; "Boko Haram" was successful on its own-with some AQIM operational, financial and media support-well before Shekau's pledge. However, the Islamic State wants to improve the name-recognition of and confidence in ISWAP among the Islamic State's global followership by:

Contributing to ISWAP's strategic communication and social media "upgrade."

Tempering Shekau's previously erratic-albeit carefully orchestrated-"righteous tormentor" persona (Journal for Deradicalization, November 2015).

"Reducing" Shekau to the role of a provincial wali, or governor, instead of an overbearing and dominant leader.

In this way, Shekau is no longer the focus of ISWAP's international image. He will neither distract from the Islamic State's broader messaging priorities related to controlling and expanding territory and attacking Shi'a, the West and Christians, nor will he pose a threat to other Islamic State leaders through the possibility of upstaging them with his characteristically bombastic videos.

Future Trajectory of ISWAP

The Islamic State's engagement with ISWAP on branding may be only the starting point for a more advanced relationship in the future. Moving forward, the Islamic State could encourage more ISWAP attacks that garner international attention. This would further justify the Islamic State's decision to acquire ISWAP in the eyes of other Islamic State followers around the world as well as potential "Pprovince candidates," such as al-Shabaab members who are considering joining the Islamic State. For the Islamic State to increase ISWAP's prominence, ISWAP's attacks in 2015 on the Shi'a procession in Kano and in Abuja or N'djamena, however, do not suffice.

Rather, what ISWAP needs to do for Islamic State is to raise its stature internationally with an attack, or attacks, that are equivalent to "Boko Haram's" first internationally significant suicide attack at the UN Headquarters in August 2011, which the mastermind, Mamman Nur, carried out with support of AQIM and al-Shabaab (Vanguard, December 7, 2011). The type of operation that ISWAP may seek to carry out in the near-term future may therefore include:

A major attack at an oil installation or café, hotel or other public place in Nigeria's southern economic hub of Lagos, where former militants in Ansaru had planted cells; [6]

A major attack outside the Lake Chad region, such as in Mali, which could show that ISWAP is a bona fide "West African" Province and that could benefit the support of former MUJWA militants who have pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi and are now under Shekau in the ISWAP hierarchy; or

A major attack in a city like Abuja or Kaduna that is the equivalent of the joint Belmokhtar-AQIM Sahara Branch (with local-level support from Macina Liberation Front, or FLM) attack at the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, Mali in November 2015, and that would receive international attention for the killing many foreigners, or any "spectacular" killing of foreigners in a way that could be publicized internationally due to

the shocking level of brutality.

It is in this regard that the relationship of ISWAP to Libya-based Islamic State militants may soon transcend the media sphere and leadership hierarchy (with Shekau reporting to an amir in Libya) to also involve training of ISWAP militants in Libya. It took only one year after the Islamic State's Sinai Province (formerly Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis) pledged allegiance to the Islamic State that the Sinai Province was capable of "impressing" the Islamic State "core" in Syria and Iraq-and around the world-by taking down a Russian airplane in Sinai and only one-and-a-half years for the Islamic State to be able to mastermind an attack in Paris from its bases in Raqqa, Syria (al-Arabiya, November 4, 2014). If Libya becomes a hub to sub-Saharan Africa as Raqqa is to other parts of the world (such as Paris and Sinai), then in 2016 or 2017, ISWAP could also carry out a new type of attack in Nigeria or West Africa under the training and coordination of the Islamic State in Libya. Moreover, if the border between Turkey and Syria closes or the Islamic State is driven out of Raqqa and Mosul, Iraq and key leaders relocate to Libya, then the Islamic State would likely further encourage militants to "migrate" or support ISWAP and the ties between the Islamic State's "core" and ISWAP would deepen.

In Spite of the Islamic State, al-Qaeda Can Find a Third Way in Africa

Shekau's pledge to al-Baghdadi and Islamic State's subsequent series of video appeals, including one from ISWAP, to al-Shabaab militants to also make the pledge succeeded in drawing some factions and militants in al-Shabaab to Islamic State, especially fighters that lived abroad, younger fighters and fighters from the Swahili Coast in Kenya and Tanzania. In addition, since 2014, not only has AQIM lost its sub-Saharan progeny of MUJWA and Ansaru to the Islamic State, but also five, albeit relatively small, factions within Algeria have defected to the Islamic State:

Al-Ansar Brigade in Centre Region in September 2015;

Al-Ghuraba Brigade in Constantine in July 2015;

Humat al-Da'wah al-Salafiyah in Tlemcen in May 2015;

Skikda Brigade in northeastern Algeria in May 2015; and

Jund Al-Khilafa in the mountains outside of Algiers in November 2014.

Defectors to the Islamic State from AQIM's orbit also extend to large numbers of foot soldiers of the former AQIM Southern Command, who established Katibat Uqba Ibn Nafi (KUIN) in Libya and Tunisia after AQIM southern commander Abu Zeid was killed by French-supported Chadian forces in northern Mali in 2013. Many foot soldiers in Ansar al-Shari'a Tunisia (AST), such as the attacker at Bardo Museum in Tunis in March 2015, also appeared loyal to the Islamic State, despite the leadership of AST, like KUIN's leadership, still being officially pro-AQIM.

AQIM's Saharan branch as well as AQIM "front groups" that it coordinates within Mali, such as Ansar Dine and the FLM, appeared to have been gravitating away from AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel and towards the independent but al-Qaeda-loyal Mokhtar Belmokhtar (as evidenced by the above-mentioned attack at the Radisson Blu in Bamako, Mali on November 2015) (Terrorism Monitor, November 13). However, the joint statements of Belmokhtar and Droukdel on December 4, 2015, saying that Belmokhtar was rejoining AQIM likely reinvigorated AQIM's standing in Africa (RFI, December 4). Moreover, although AQIM's Saharan Branch has "upgraded" its strategic communication to resemble more closely-but not necessarily support-the Islamic State, recent Saharan Branch videos still maintain distinct characteristics of longtime AQIM videos dating back to the time of the AQIM's predecessor-the GSPC-by showing, for example, the ethno-linguistic diversity in its ranks that had spawned both MUJWA and Ansaru in 2011 (Leak Source, June 23; Long War Journal, September 3). This does not mean AQIM will "lose" its Saharan Branch, but does suggest that the Saharan Branch is re-evaluating its modus operandi, particularly related to recruitment and strategic communication, as a response to Islamic State competition in the region.

Thus, al-Qaeda's African stalwarts of al-Shabaab and AQIM have both been experiencing separations, fractures and defections to the Islamic State. This, however, has provided an opportunity for African jihadists to find a "third way" between an aging but strategically sound al-Qaeda and a dynamic yet often over-reaching Islamic State. Mokhtar Belmokhtar is the type of militant who, at least in the Sahel and Nigeria, has both the intent and the networks to find a "third way" and unite jihadists in a constellation of cells and factions that shift between the space and functionalities of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. His willingness to re-join AQIM shows that this "third way" will likely be channeled through al-Qaeda and could present a significant challenges to the Islamic State's continued growth on the continent.

While thus far Shekau has managed to maintain the unity of ISWAP since his pledge to al-Baghdadi, there are other influential and perhaps better connected militants-such as al-Barnawi, Mamman Nur and Mahamat Daud, the latter who connected "Boko Haram" to Malian militants and trainers and facilitated Shekau's communication with the Islamic State-who could abandon Shekau and re-form a new al-Qaeda network in Nigeria as Ansaru was. They could build this "third way" in Nigeria and the Sahel under the guidance of Belmokhtar or even al-Barnawi, who prefers anonymity and is likely more economically and strategically influential (and more operationally unencumbered due to his low profile) than Belmokhtar in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region.

Conclusion

While 2015 was the year of the Islamic State's widely publicized expansion in Nigeria, 2016 could see the revival or reconstitution of al-Qaeda networks in Nigeria and other areas of Africa, although they may not publicly declare themselves as "al-Qaeda." Nonetheless, in the near-term future, the Islamic State is likely to continue to influence ISWAP beyond the fully integrated strategic communication and media cooperation that was established in 2015. The competition between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Nigeria and West Africa could also lead to a period of "outbidding" where each side tries to carry out more spectacular attacks than the other.

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Notes

1. The militants mostly retreated from the territories they held after Nigeria and neighboring countries launched a military offensive against the militants in northeastern Nigeria in February 2015.
2. There have been over 100 young girls deployed in more than 70 incidents of female suicide attacks since the Chibok kidnapping in April 2014. Although no Chibok girls have been deployed in these attacks, the network that masterminded the Chibok kidnapping-which is most likely a "rogue" former Ansaru faction- is likely also behind the deployment of female suicide bombers. The rate of ISWAP's female suicide attacks far exceeds that of other terrorist groups historically, including the Tamil Tigers, Chechen "Black Widows", and Kurdish groups. The only other terrorist group to organize so many female suicide attacks in a short time-although still not as many or for as long a time period as ISWAP-was the predecessor to IS under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, ordered such attacks mostly for the purpose of "shaming" men into also carrying out suicide attacks. However, ISWAP's purpose appears to purely operational and not as a form of motivation to men or propaganda. Nonetheless, it is notable that al-Zarqawi ordered these attacks during the time when he was leaving al-Qaeda's orbit and moving toward establishing what became the IS around 2006-2007, which is about the same stage that the "rogue" former Ansaru faction would have been in when it began orchestrating these attacks in Nigeria. It also notable, therefore, that Shekau has largely modeled his public persona on al-Zarqawi since 2014.
3. Nigeria's mostly Iran-influenced Shia population includes several million people is the largest African Shia community in Sub-Saharan Africa.
4. The holding and administering of territory is essential to the IS's claim that it has a Caliphate because holding territory-in addition to al-Baghdadi's being from the prophetic Qurayshi Arab tribe and IS's receipt of support from Islamic scholars (ulema)- is one of the three conditions of a legitimate declaration of a

Caliphate, according to IS. Although ISWAP has not shown that conducts as much administration as IS videos from Syria and Iraq, or even Sinai and Libya, ISWAP videos have shown sharia punishments, salah prayers with hundreds of worshippers, and convoys of armed vehicles, in ISWAP-controlled areas, which are intended to portray the holding of territory.

5. This, again, suggested, that the IS was following-and endorsing-ISWAP's growing operational presence beyond Nigeria, but whether or not the attacks in neighboring countries were at IS's behest or the result of ISWAP independently nullifying "non-aggression pacts" with Niger, Chad and Cameroon as a result of their offensives against ISWAP is debatable.

6. Thus far there has only been one or two small-scale attacks in Lagos, including a female suicide bombing near a petrol tanker in June 2014.

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