

II. Research Notes

Boko Haram's International Reach

by Ely Karmon

Abstract

Although most of Boko Haram's terrorist activity is focused, for the moment, on Nigerian territory, this Research Note argues that it is already an important international jihadist organisation. The watershed that marks Boko Haram's passage from a purely Nigerian phenomenon to an international jihadist actor is its attack on the United Nations Headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria's capital, on August 26, 2011. The bulk of BH's membership, the indiscriminate and cruel characteristic of its attacks, the complexity of the Nigerian religious and ethnic context, the sheer weight of the Nigerian state in an instable neighborhood - Cameroun, Niger, Chad, Mali - and its proximity to the jihadist battle front in the Sahel convert it into an immediate and infectious regional threat.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Nigeria

Introduction

Jama`at Ahl al-Sunna li al-Da`wa wa al-Jihad, popularly known as Boko Haram (BH), rose to international prominence in 2010 and 2011 when it carried out a series of deadly attacks against the Nigerian government and detonated a car bomb at a United Nations building in Abuja, the capital.

The year 2013 saw a major increase in the indiscriminate terror attacks by BH, which killed and injured thousands of innocent civilians, police and military officers, public officials and group members. Attacks between January 2012 – August 2013 included not only 50 churches and Nigerian Christians but also clerics or senior Islamic figures critical of Boko Haram and “un-Islamic” institutions or persons engaged in “un-Islamic” behaviour.[1] According to a UN humanitarian agency, attacks between May and mid-December 2013 killed more than 1,200 people, a figure that does not include insurgents killed during targeted military operations.[2] Boko Haram targets include police stations, government buildings, churches, politicians, newspapers, banks, and schools. Tactics include drive-by shootings on motorcycles, the use of improvised explosive devices, and starting in 2010, suicide bombings.

This Research Note will focus on the international dimensions of Boko Haram and the threat it represents to the international community. It will not deal with its history, the social, political and economic factors which led to its formation and its transformation into the most dangerous Nigerian salafist/jihadist organisation.

Although there is already some in-depth academic literature on BH, by Nigerian and Western scholars [3] the point of departure of this discussion will be Emilie Oftedal's report “Boko Haram – an overview,” for the prestigious Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI).[4]

Oftedal's conclusion is that “Boko Haram has focused mainly on national grievances and targets” and she warns against “exaggerating Boko Haram's connections with foreign militants and considers the likelihood of Boko Haram becoming a major international terrorist threat in the near future to be relatively low.” However, the report also raises the possibility that BH or one of its factions—mainly the splinter group Ansaru—may become more internationally oriented and mount further attacks outside Nigeria. It claims that Ansaru “has conducted several attacks against Westerners and targeted soldiers going to Mali, and appears more globally

oriented than the 'core' BH movement led by Abukakar Shekau.” [5] In contrast, the Jamestown Foundation's Boko Haram expert Jacob Zenn has a different take than Oftedal concerning Ansaru. In his view Ansaru was created by al-Qaida in the Islamic Magrheb (AQIM) and has a close operational relationship with BH: “In many ways Ansaru is the internationalist component of Boko Haram; although, it may not exist as a distinct entity from Boko Haram, since the French intervention in Mali in January led to the two group's integration when Ansaru lost contacts with a retreating AQIM.” [6]

Another perspective, as argued in this Research Note, is that BH is already an important international jihadist organisation although most of its terrorist activity is focused, for the moment, on Nigerian territory. In fact, Oftedal also wrote a M.A. thesis about the transnational aspects of Boko Haram, where she analyses their significance for the group's capabilities and reach. In her discussion she refers mainly to the states bordering Nigeria that are threatened by the BH terrorist activities, namely Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Benin. [7] As described later in this analysis, the growing regional dimension of the Boko Haram threat represents a form of internationalization which, if remained unchecked, will have dire consequences in the years to come.

In August 2009, about a week after the death of its then-leader Muhammed Yusuf, Sanni Umaru, the interim head of the organisation, published an ideological declaration regarding its goals and methods of operation. This can be seen as a milestone in the organisation's move to the second phase, evolution toward an international orientation: “In fact, we are spread across all the 36 states in Nigeria, and Boko Haram is just a version of Al-Qaeda, which we align with and respect. We support Osama bin Laden, we shall carry out his command in Nigeria until the country is completely converted to Islam, which is according to the wish of Allah.” [8] Several years later, documents seized at Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad in Pakistan showed that top level BH leaders had been in touch with Al-Qaeda “within the past 18 months.” [9]

In early 2010, Abdelmalik Droukdel, the leader of AQIM, publicly offered Boko Haram assistance in early 2010. [10] Then in early July 2010, Abubakar Shekau, Muhammed Yusuf's deputy, who was thought to have been killed by police in 2009, appeared in a video and claimed leadership of the group. He said he was ready to launch attacks on western influences in Nigeria. On July 13, Shekau issued another statement expressing solidarity with Al-Qaeda and threatened the United States. [11] In October 2010, AQIM's media arm published a statement by Shekau, the first time AQIM disseminated an official message from another group. AQIM and BH officials have referenced growing ties in public statements. [12] According to Jacob Zenn, Shekau is excellent in classical Arabic and well versed in Islamic scholarship. His sermons show a synthesis of local salafist preaching with calls for international jihadism and for breaking down the Western and U.S.-led world order. [13]

While these statements reflect various forms of international intentions, the watershed that marks Boko Haram's passage from a purely Nigerian phenomenon to an international jihadist actor is its attack on the United Nations Headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria's capital. On August 26, 2011, a suicide bomber drove a vehicle with an improvised explosive device to the U.N. headquarters in Abuja, killing 23 people and injuring more than 80 others. BH took responsibility for the attack, the first time it had targeted an international, non-Nigerian entity. The Nigerian State Security Service (SSS) named the alleged bombing mastermind as Mamman Nur, “a notorious Boko Haram element with Al-Qaeda links who returned recently from Somalia.” [14]

The SSS' claim fits with a June 2011 statement by BH that some of its members had gone for training in Somalia: “We want to make it known that our Jihadists have arrived [in] Nigeria from Somalia where they got serious training on warfare from our brethren who made the country ungovernable and forced the interim government to relocate to Kenya... despite the armoured carriers that they are boasting of, they are no match

with the kind of training we acquired in Somalia.”[15]

Two videos later emerged purporting to show members of BH preparing for suicide attacks, including Mohammed Abul Barra, the suicide bomber of the U.N. building, launching a vague warning to “Obama and other infidels”. The voice said to be Shekau’s calls the U.N. headquarters a “forum of all the global evil” while also offering praise for Osama bin Laden. [16]

The scale and method of the attack suggested that BH had adopted the tactics of AQIM, which took responsibility for a similar attack on United Nations offices in Algeria on December 11, 2007. The suicide attacks became AQIM’s signature and represented a combination of local and global terror. [17] By calling the Algerian U.N. headquarters a “Green Zone,” and labeling its staff a “den of international infidels,” AQIM itself symbolically relived the August 2003 attack by Al-Qaeda in Iraq on the U.N.’s mission in Baghdad, which killed Chief of Mission Sergio Vieira de Mello and caused the U.N. to depart from Iraq. [18]

According to Oftedal, Ansaru claimed responsibility for the December 2012 kidnapping of a French engineer from his residence in Katsina state, presented as retaliation for France’s ban on the Islamic veil and its role in the military intervention in northern Mali. In January 2013, Ansaru attacked a convoy of troops in Kogi State en route to deployment with West African forces in Mali trying to stop Nigerian troops joining Western powers. Meanwhile, she also gives examples that support the view of BH as an international jihadist actor. Like other researchers, she cites Malian security officials saying Boko Haram fighters were in the majority in the attack on the Algerian consulate in Gao in April 2011; Niger’s president Mahamadou Issoufou June 2012 statement that Niger had evidence that BH was running training camps in Gao, Mali; the Nigerian Air Chief Marshal, Oluseyi Petinrin, claim in June 2012 that BH had ties to AQIM, the first time a Nigerian top security official made such links in public. In July 2012, Gen. Carter Ham, head of the US military’s Africa Command, said there were signs that BH, al-Shabaab and AQIM were increasingly coordinating their activities.

Shekau’s November 2012 video, unlike his five other statements issued in 2012, was in Arabic and was posted on online jihadist forums, an indication that he was seeking to appeal to both the wider jihadist community and to Al-Qaeda’s leaders. Shekau refers to the fighters in the jihadist theaters as his “brothers” and addresses “the soldiers of the Islamic State in Mali ... our brothers and sheikhs in beloved Somalia ... our brothers and sheikhs in Libya ... our brothers and sheikhs in oppressed Afghanistan ... our brothers and sheikhs in wounded Iraq ... our brothers and sheikhs in Pakistan ... our brothers and sheikhs in blessed Yemen ... our brothers and sheikhs in usurped Palestine, and other places where our brothers are doing jihad in the Cause of Allah.” Shekau warns “Britain, America, Israel, and Nigeria” that the killing of jihadist leaders will not defeat the groups. Shekau says that BH is “with our mujahideen brothers” in their fight against “the Jews and the Crusader Christians.” According to Bill Roggio, an American commentator on military affairs, Shekau’s videotape is very similar to tapes issued by Somalia’s Al-Shabaab in 2008, when the group was making overtures to join al Qaeda. [19]

The December 2013 nighttime attack launched by hundreds of BH fighters on a Nigerian Air Force base in the city of Maiduguri, in which a number of security personnel were killed and several aircraft destroyed, is reminiscent of attacks by Al-Qaeda’s associates on important military bases in other theaters of war: the Pakistani Taliban’s attack on Pakistani Naval Station Mehran in Karachi in May 2011 and the Afghan Taliban’s assault on Camp Bastion in Helmand in September 2012.[20]

Speaking in Arabic, Hausa and Kanuri in a video disseminated on the Internet, Shekau took responsibility for the raid on the Maiduguri air base and claimed “the whole world” feared him - U.S. President Barack Obama, French President Francois Hollande, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and even the late

British premier Margaret Thatcher. He singled out in particular the U.S.: “You are boasting you are going to join forces with Nigeria to crush us. Bloody liars,” he said, adding: “By Allah, we will never stop. Don’t think we will stop in Maiduguri. “Tomorrow you will see us in America itself. Our operation is not confined to Nigeria. It is for the whole world.”[21]

The arrest of key figures of the group proved that its links with AQIM opened it up to funding from groups in Saudi Arabia such as the Islamic World Society and some prominent local businessmen. From the trial of Kabiru Umar, suspected mastermind of the Christmas Day bombing of St. Theresa’s Catholic Church, in Madalla on 25 December 2011, it appeared that funding came also from an Islamic group, Musilimi Yaa’maa, based in Algeria. [22]

The Regional Threat

The regional aspect of BH’s “internationalism” can be seen as the most immediate and infectious threat. It is of note that most of BH’s activities take place within the boundaries of the 19th century Bornu Empire which cover northeastern Nigeria, the northern tip of Cameroon, southwestern Chad and northeastern Niger. After the 2009 rising in Maiduguri documents found on the bodies of dead militants indicated that many of them had come from Niger and Chad. [23]

Leaders of neighboring countries such as President Biya of Cameroon and President Debi of Chad as well as leading diplomats of Niger who are devising regional mechanisms to attack BH, recognised it has increasingly become a regional issue. [24]

The ability of BH fighters to escape into other countries has greatly frustrated Nigeria. A Borno state official accused Cameroonian authorities of refusing to arrest or chase BH militants fleeing across the border after carrying out attacks in Nigeria. Some Nigerian security sources complain that Cameroon has shown little interest in the problem, while Niger and Chad do not have adequate resources to help. [25]

Cameroon

One of the main difficulties for the Nigerian security forces in patrolling the border with Cameroon is a lack of infrastructure, which allows BH to set up bases and training camps in the desert or forested areas of the northern Nigerian-Cameroon border region. Shekau has repeatedly appeared in video messages sent from his hideout, allegedly located somewhere in northern Cameroon, and BH has consistently used Cameroon as a rear base for carrying out attacks in Nigeria. For example, in February 2013 Boko Haram kidnapped a family of seven Frenchmen in Cameroon, near the Nigerian border, the first major incident by the group outside Nigeria. In the statement claiming responsibility for the attack the group made reference to the French-led intervention in Mali: “Let the French president know that he has launched war against Islam and we are fighting him everywhere. Let him know that we are spread everywhere to save our brothers.”

A missionary has been killed and several churches set ablaze in attacks by BH in Cameroon. The Nigerian missionary, David Dina Mataware, with the Christian Missionary Foundation (CMF), was killed on November 13, 2013 in a village which straddles the Nigeria-Cameroon border. He was murdered on the same day as the kidnapping of a French priest, but the death was not reported by the media even though both incidents happened in the same area. [26] BH claimed in a statement that it “coordinated” the kidnapping of French priest Father Georges Vandenbeusch with Ansaru. He was liberated at the end of December 2013. [27]

Most recently, on December 19, 2013, a convoy of BH militants crossed the border from Cameroon into Banki, Nigeria, and attacked the military Kur Mohammed Barracks in Bama. The attack was particularly traumatic because it came only days after Boko Haram destroyed parts of the Maiduguri air base.

Nigeria recently negotiated a security agreement with Cameroon to grant its troops access to BH settlements which has become the new haven for its fighters. The agreement ensures Nigeria is not accused of violating the sovereignty of Cameroon when troops launch air or ground assaults against BH hideouts across the border. [28]

The Cameroonian authorities have set up tighter border controls in the Far North region to guard against infiltration by BH fighters. A rapid response military unit has been deployed and some tourist hotels now have armed guards. However, the authorities admit that it is impossible to completely secure Cameroon's longest border. The two countries have agreed to conduct separate but coordinated border patrols. [29]

Niger

Authorities in Niger arrested 15 suspected BH members in Diffa in February 2012 and seized home-made explosives and grenades. Suspected BH members were arrested in the Zinder region in September 2012. [30] In May 2013, BH inmates in a prison near the Nigerien capital of Niamey, with support from comrades in Nigeria and Niger launched an attack on their prison guards. In October 2012, Niger and Nigeria signed an agreement on joint border patrols, with the aim of restricting movement of illicit arms and militants across the borders.

Chad

Chad President Idris Deby has warned of the insecurity in the Lake Chad region based on what he describes as “the permanent threat” posed by BH and AQIM, and has called for the creation of a joint deterrence force comprised of military forces from Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon and the Central African Republic. In January 2012, the Nigerian government ordered the temporary closure of its borders with Cameroon, Chad and Niger to prevent cross-border activities of BH militants and roving bands of Chadian deserters and former rebels who have made the region south of Chad their base of operations. [31]

Mali and beyond

BH fighters traveled to Mali in 2012, when the militant Salafist groups AQIM, MUJAO (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa), and Ansar al-Dine controlled the northern part of the country and established closer relations with these groups. [32]

The pattern of attacks that has occurred since then indicates the insurgents may have to a large degree scattered into more remote areas of the region. Dumba is located near Lake Chad and close to Nigeria's borders with Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

In August 2012 the imam of the Grand Mosque in Bignona, southern Senegal, claimed that Boko Haram was recruiting local youths. [33] There are indications that BH has recruited some militants from neighboring countries. Mamman Nur—believed to be second in command to Shekau—is from Chad, while Abubakar Kilakam and Ali Jalingo, responsible for major attacks in the northeastern Borno State, are said to be from Niger. [34] Interestingly, although there are large Nigerian communities in Europe and the United States there is no information about “foreign fighters” from Western countries traveling to Nigeria to join Boko

Haram, as Oftedal notes.

The International Context

The French Intervention in Mali

The French military and African Union states' forces intervention in Mali since January 2013 has provided new opportunities for the internationalisation of Boko Haram's activity and has brought it closer to other jihadist groups fighting in the Sahel: AQIM, The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) and Ansar al-Dine. At the same time it presented the group with possibilities for training, combat experience and operational cooperation with these organisations.

United States Policy

A November 2011 report by the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, concluded that "Boko Haram has the intent and may be developing the capability to coordinate on a rhetorical and operational level with al-Qaeda in the lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Somalian Al Shabaab." The committee called for designating both BH, and its splinter group, Ansaru, as foreign terrorist organisations. The committee advised that BH "intent and capability to attack the U.S. homeland" be not discounted, warning the U.S. intelligence community to avoid repeating mistakes made with Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and Al-Qaida in the Arab Peninsula – both groups were underestimated until they attempted to launch attacks on American soil. [35]

Already in June 2012 the U.S. had labelled BH commanders Abubakar Shekau, Khalid al-Barnawi and Abubakar Adam Kamar "Specially Designated Global Terrorists." According to the U.S. State Department Khalid al-Barnawi has "ties to BH" and "close links to AQIM." According to a source cited by AFP, Barnawi is believed to have run a militant training camp in the Algerian desert and was involved in the kidnapping of French nationals in Niger in 2011 and a Briton and an Italian in Nigeria in 2012.

Since June 2013, the U.S. government has been offering \$23 million worth of rewards for information on key leaders of terrorist organisations in West Africa. BH's leader, Abubakar Shekau, heads the list with a reward of \$7 million for information leading to his location, some \$2 million higher than Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a veteran jihadi leader in the Sahel. This suggested a shift in U.S. thinking regarding threats emanating from BH. [36]

Opponents of the Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) designation, like Rep. Patrick Meehan, perceived BH as "little more than a grassroots insurrection with no defined leader or structure." Some believe that the FTO designation could have negative implications for the U.S. and Nigerian partnership. John Campbell, Senior Fellow for Africa Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, and former US Ambassador to Nigeria, suggests that BH "could acquire a jihadist character if the United States is seen as supportive of Nigerian security approaches." [37]

On November 13, 2013 the U.S. State Department finally decided to designate Boko Haram and Ansaru as Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTOs) and as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs), thus assisting U.S. Justice and Treasury Departments in collaborating with counter-terrorism partners to investigate and prosecute terrorist suspects or supporters in the United States, including charitable organisations providing material support to these terrorists groups.

The groups operate locally, but have international connections and resources. As the U.S. government views Nigeria as an important economic partner, Nigeria's security and stability has added importance to the U.S. Notably, Nigeria is the second largest African destination for U.S. foreign direct investment, and provides approximately eight percent of U.S. oil imports. Nigeria has also been a major stabilising force in Africa through its major contribution of UN peacekeeping forces. [38]

Nnamdi Obasi, a Nigeria analyst with the International Crisis Group (ICG) asserts that the move will encourage BH to aggressively target U.S. interests in Nigeria and further radicalise the movement and push it to strengthen international linkages with other Islamist groups. "Some Nigerians are also concerned that it could embolden the US military to launch military operations in the country unilaterally, much like they've been doing in Pakistan," he claims. [39]

At the end of December 2013, Canada joined the United States in designating BH as a terrorist organisation under its Criminal Code. By virtue of the listing, the assets of the groups and anyone associated with them in Canada will be "seized and forfeited."

Conclusion

Jonathan Hill, from the Defence Studies Department, King's College London, rightly compares the path of Boko Haram towards a bloody jihadist group with the Algerian model. The extreme violence and indiscriminate character of its attacks (burning or throat cutting of dozens of students) are re-enacting what has already happened in Algeria. The extreme forms of terrorism and cruel guerrilla tactics of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) leading to the factionalism of its direct forbears, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) and finally the AQIM under the influence of Ayman al-Zawahiri could tie more closely BH to the Algerian jihadi group. [40]

Because Nigeria is Africa's largest oil producer and most populous state, the internal instability provoked by the expanding violence of Boko Haram could have major regional and global implications.

The bulk of BH's membership, the indiscriminate and cruel characteristic of its attacks, the complexity of the Nigerian religious and ethnic context, the sheer weight of the Nigerian state in an instable neighborhood (Cameroon, Niger, Chad, Mali) and its proximity to the jihadist battle front in the Sahel play in this direction.

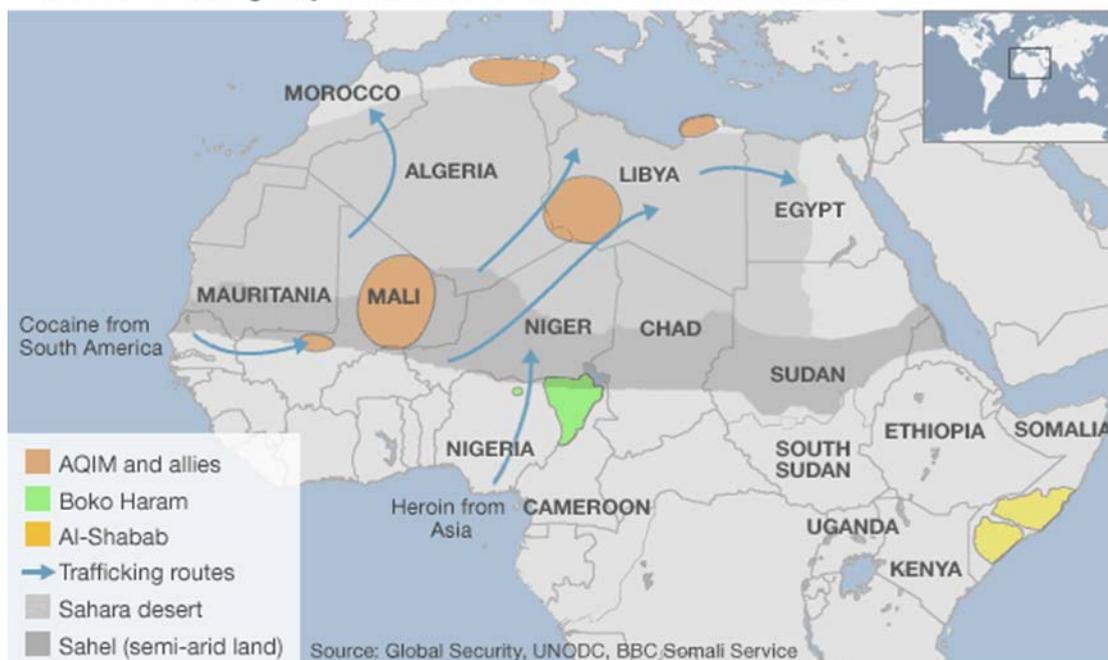
However, on the background of the forthcoming important presidential and legislative elections in Nigeria in February 2015, it is possible Boko Haram will make a special effort to expand its terrorist campaign to southern Nigerian Christian states in the hope of provoking a religious war and present itself as the defender of Nigeria's Muslims.

Paradoxically, if the Nigerian army and security forces succeed in curtailing BH's terrorist and guerrilla activities in the North and seriously weaken the organisation, the result could be enhanced activities outside Nigerian territory, fractionalisation and closer cooperation with foreign "brother" groups, as happened in the past to the GIA/GSPC in Algeria, leading to the Sahel-based AQIM, or the Chechen insurgents driven south to Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and Ingushetia to form the so-called Islamic Caucasus Emirate.



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Islamist militant groups and their areas of influence in Africa



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About the Author: Ely Karmon, PhD, is Senior Research Scholar at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) and the Institute for Policy and Strategy (IPS) at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzliya,

Israel. He lectures on International Terrorism and CBRN terrorism at the M.A. Counterterrorism Studies at IDC. His fields of research include political violence, international terrorism, CBRN terrorism, and the strategic influence of terrorism and subversion in the Middle East and worldwide.

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