

### III. Research Notes

#### Islamic State and al-Qaeda Competing for Hearts & Minds

by Ely Karmon

##### *Abstract*

*The Islamic State under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and al-Qaeda under the leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri are competing for the hearts and minds of jihadists worldwide but also for territorial control in the Middle East, Africa and Central Asia. Three examples, referring to France, Yemen and Nigeria respectively, illustrate this struggle among the main jihadist entities.*

**Keywords:** *Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, Yemen, AQAP, Boko Haram, Foreign Fighters*

##### *Introduction*

In his attempt to successfully compete with the Islamic State (IS) under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—who has claimed the title of Caliph Ibrahim—al-Qaeda (AQ) leader Ayman al-Zawahiri announced, on September 4, 2014, the establishment of the new affiliate group “Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent” (AQIS). He also challenged the legitimacy of al-Baghdadi’s claim to the title of caliph by clarifying that the new jihadi organization will work under the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, whose Emir is the “commander of the faithful” Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taliban leader.

AQIS has the same objectives as those articulated by Osama bin Laden and the other founders of al-Qaeda: prepare Muslims for jihad against their enemies; liberate Muslim lands now ruled by non-Muslims; and revive the Islamic caliphate. Al-Zawahiri mentioned Burma (Myanmar), Bangladesh, and India’s regions of Assam, Gujarat and Kashmir as battlegrounds for jihad by the new organization. This episode illustrates the evolving struggle of the two jihadist leaders, al-Zawahiri and al-Baghdadi, for the allegiance (*bay’ah*) of AQ and other jihadist and salafist franchises in the Middle East and beyond. This research noted provides an analysis of three recent examples of this competition for hearts, minds, territory and influence.

##### *The January 2015 Attacks in France*

One week after the January 7, 2015, terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo’s offices in Paris, the senior leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Nasser bin Ali al Ansi, claimed responsibility for the massacre on behalf of his organization. Newly released documents recovered in Osama bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan in May 2011 reveal that al Ansi was previously appointed to the role of deputy general manager within al-Qaeda’s global hierarchy.[1]

According to U.S. officials, Said and Cherif Kouachi, the two brothers who carried out the massacre at the offices of the French satirical magazine, received training in Yemen in 2009 and 2011. Chérif Kouachi told a French TV station that he had been funded by a network loyal to Anwar al-Awlaki, a senior leader of AQAP involved in recruiting and training camps who was killed by a drone strike in 2011 in Yemen.[2]

Amedy Coulibaly, who between 7 and 9 January 2015 killed a policewoman and four people in a Parisian Jewish kosher grocery store, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in a video published online two days after his death. In the video, Coulibaly said he had coordinated his attacks with the Kouachi brothers and claimed

they “did some things together, some things separate” and arranged “to synchronize [their movements].” [3]

As Coulibaly’s video was filmed in his apartment between the shooting of the policewoman and the attack on the grocery store and was edited and posted by someone outside, it is not clear whether his allegiance pledge represents any previous link with IS or whether it was his ad-hoc decision, perhaps meant to attract more attention to his terrorist attacks and his personal role in the Charlie Hebdo event.

In the interview given by Coulibaly’s common law wife Hayat Boumeddiene to *Dar al Islam*, a French ISIS magazine, after she had fled France and reached ISIS-controlled Syria, her partner is described as “burning to join his brothers and fight with them against the enemies of Islam in the Caliphate.” However, he does not appear to have been a member of an ISIS cell.[4] In a way, Coulibaly’s behavior seems to epitomize the competition between the two groups, possibly reflecting the desire of a humble sympathizer to claim affiliation with the more famous entity.

While AQAP quickly took credit for the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, IS referred to Coulibaly’s terrorist operation only a month later, in its English magazine *Dabiq*, issue # 7. Under the title “The good example of Abu Basir al-Ifriqi”, Amedy Coulibaly is presented as a “brave mujāhid” who had given his *bay’ah* to the Khilāfah [Caliphate] “beforehand – immediately upon its announcement – and sat in waiting for instructions from its leadership, while never traveling to Iraq nor Shām.” He met with Muslims in France, calling them to give *bay’ah* and defend the Khilāfah, while refuting the doubts spread against it. He provided “the two mujāhid” Kouachi brothers with money and weapons “so as to call to jihād under the banner of the Khilāfah.” The *Dabiq* article includes a long list of his good deeds in prison, his prayers, and the “order” to his wife to wear the hijāb.[5]

The same *Dabiq* edition also features an interview with Coulibaly’s wife, another “good example” for the wives of mujahids, happy to live “in a land where the law of Allah is implemented.” Hayat notes that prior to his death, Coulibaly asked her not to show him Islamic State videos because “it would make him want to perform *hijrah* [migration] immediately and that would have conflicted with his intent to carry out the operations in France.” [6]

Coulibaly, and his wife, are thus seen as self-radicalized Muslims influenced by IS deeds and propaganda. That is exactly what IS attempts to achieve through its sophisticated media campaign; to propagate the success of lone-wolf and homegrown terrorism narratives without investing much resources or effort. In this it imitates and in some measure improves the AQAP propaganda strategy, which was hitherto most prominently represented by AQAP’s older *Inspire* magazine. The ongoing investigation of the attacks and the arrest of some people considered to have supported the attacks should clarify the connections of AQAP, IS and other factions with these events, and hopefully explain the apparent cooperation between two rival organizations or their militants on the ground.

### **Yemen**

In November 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced “the expansion of the Islamic State to new lands,” including Yemen. Announcements of allegiance to al-Baghdadi came from a prominent cleric named Mamoun bin Abd al-Hamid Hatem and other unidentified Yemeni jihadists who do not represent any well-known jihadist groups.[7] According to a Yemeni official, in January 2015 ISIS had a presence in at least three provinces in southern and central Yemen, and there is a “real competition” between ISIS and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), although AQAP remains the dominant force.[8]

The Islamic State's "Sana'a Province" in Yemen claimed credit for its first major operation on March 20, 2015, following four suicide attacks at two Houthi mosques in the capital in which at least 142 people were killed and more than 351 were wounded—the deadliest terrorist attack in Yemen's history. This attack was not only a serious blow to IS's avowed Shia enemies in Yemen but also an attempt to compete on the ground with AQAP, al-Qaeda's most important and successful faction, characterized by Washington as "the region's deadliest al-Qaeda franchise." [9] The predominance of AQAP in al-Qaeda's global network is attested by the appointment by Ayman al Zawahiri of Nasir al Wuhayshi as al-Qaeda's "global general manager" in 2013, besides his position as AQAP's emir.

AQAP distanced itself from the attack, asserting that it does not attack mosques. The very day of the suicide attacks at the Houthi mosques, AQAP seized control of the city of al-Houta. Al-Qaeda-linked Ansar al-Sharia militants took part in the fighting alongside other armed elements. [10] In 2012 AQAP briefly seized power in the city of Radaa but local tribesmen and government troops expelled them. Now that the Houthis are controlling Sanaa, however, the tribes in Radaa are siding with AQAP again. [11]

AQAP has been active in southern Yemen for a long time and after the eruption of the uprising against the former president Abdallah Saleh in 2011 it took control of most of the Abyan Governorate (which borders the Aden Governorate) and declared it an Islamic Caliphate in May 2011. The Yemeni military largely drove out AQAP elements and its allied faction Ansar al-Shari'a from much of Abyan in 2012. Despite the military campaign staged earlier that year, AQAP remained determined to establish an Islamic state in southern Yemen and showed few signs of weakness. [12]

IS is possibly trying to implant itself in Yemen on the background of the growing Sunni-Shia divide, sensing perhaps that it is losing ground in Iraq and Syria, after the defeat in Kobane and the loss of its Tikrit stronghold.

The Sunni tribes who provide the bulk of the fighters against the Houthis could turn now towards IS for help in their fight for the control of Yemen. Interestingly IS is still silent on the Saudi coalition air strikes in Yemen.

AQAP for its part is actively engaged in the fight against the Houthis and Saleh's troops. It captured, on April 2, 2015, the eastern port of Mukalla, Yemen's fourth biggest city, and freed 300 prisoners from its central prison.

U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter recently stated that the fall of the Yemeni government at the beginning of the year hurt joint counterterrorism operations there and that "AQAP has seized the opportunity of the disorder there and the collapse of the central government", making gains on the ground. [13] The Houthis seized a Yemeni airbase that had been used by U.S. forces for counterterrorism operations as its remaining military personnel had withdrawn from the base. AQAP meanwhile boasted it would pay a bounty of 20 kilograms of gold for the killing or capture of the Houthi leader, Abdel-Malik Al-Houthi, or of Mr. Saleh, the former president. [14]

Bruce Riedel, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, holds that U.S. and its regional allies' counter-terrorism efforts have been dealt a very significant setback as there is no American embassy or boots on the ground and, more importantly, the U.S. can no longer count on crucial intelligence. He evaluates that "AQAP will be in a stronger position—at least in Sunni regions to the south and east—as it will no longer face constant pressure from the United States and the Yemeni government." [15]

*Nigeria's Boko Haram pays Allegiance to al-Baghdadi*

On March 7, 2015 Abubakar Shekau, the leader of Boko Haram (BH), pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the emir of the Islamic State. In an audio message in Arabic released on Twitter he said: “[W]e announce our allegiance to the Caliph of the Muslims...and will hear and obey in times of difficulty and prosperity, in hardship and ease, and to endure being discriminated against, and not to dispute about rule with those in power.” Thomas Joscelyn claims that U.S. officials told *The Long War Journal* in February 2015 that the Islamic State had dispatched a team to Nigeria to negotiate a more formal alliance, and that BH’s propaganda has been promoted by Islamic State media operatives in recent months.[16]

On March 12, 2015, the Islamic State accepted the pledge of allegiance of BH, according to an audiotape from its spokesman Mohammed al-Adnani: “We give you glad tidings today about the expansion of the Caliphate to West Africa, for the Caliph, may Allah preserve him, accepted the pledge of allegiance of our brothers in Jama’at Ahl al-Sunnah Lil Dawa Wal Jihad [Boko Haram]. Adnani even said that Muslims who are “unable to immigrate to Iraq, Sham, Yemen, the Peninsula, and Khorasan,” may not be “unable [to immigrate to] Africa” and must support Boko Haram.[17]

In its propaganda, IS portrayed BH’s decision as a major boost for the group. Before Adnani’s speech was made public, IS had released several videos from followers and members praising Shekau’s announcement. [18]

Meanwhile, since late July 2014—almost parallel to the ISIS occupation of Mosul in Iraq and its thrust into Sunni territory—BH has captured large swaths of land in the states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa across northeastern Nigeria and towns along the Cameroon border, such as Gamboru-Ngala and Banki. It has become a more conventional force with territorial expansion as its core objective, and a military strategy to go with it. According to some estimates, as of late September 2014, approximately 3 million people in northeastern Nigeria and in the border regions of Cameroon were under Boko Haram’s rule. Moreover, BH has also declared an “Islamic Caliphate” across the land under its control with the city of Gwoza designated as its headquarters.[19]

The formal proclamation of the establishment of the caliphate was made in a video released shortly after the seizure of Gwoza in which Shekau declared: “We are grateful to Allah for the big victory he granted our members in Gwoza and made the town part of our Islamic caliphate,” and he also categorically rejected the Nigerian state in his statement.

Jacob Zenn noted in December 2014 that “[d]espite its previous position as part of al-Qaeda’s global movement, Boko Haram appears to have shifted almost completely into the Islamic State’s orbit” since Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the creation of a caliphate in July 2014. Analyzing two BH videos of November 1 and 10, Zenn concluded that they showed an ideological shift to IS. In the 10 November 2014 video, Shekau conveys greetings to “brethren” in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Shishan (Chechnya), Yemen, Somalia and “the caliphate in Iraq and Syria” but does not mention AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri or other al-Qaeda affiliates, as he did in prior videos and statements. No evidence exists, however, according to this analysis, that Shekau is trying to rival al-Baghdadi’s caliphate.[20]

In a recent article, Zenn argues that “the key factor that set the stage for the Boko Haram-Islamic State merger was the reintegration of Ansaru’s “GSPC network” and “AQIM network” into BH, as members of these two networks maintained contacts with former al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) militants, who abandoned AQIM in favor of ISIS in Syria and Libya and may have mediated between BH and ISIS. Possibly the “AQIM faction” collaborated with IS on video production used to create a mass social media

platform in preparation for Shekau's *bay`a* to al-Baghdadi.[21]

According to Zenn, IS's desire to expand into Africa and promote a new "wilaya West Africa" enabled BH to achieve the creation of an Islamic state legitimated by other "pure salafists." IS could provide for BH what AQ could not, as Osama bin Laden rejected the idea of state formation in the near-term. Moreover, the Islamic State has elevated Shekau's stature and legitimacy in the international jihadist arena as Boko Haram's sole leader with respect to other factions in Nigeria and West Africa, something which Ayman al-Zawahiri never did.[22]

Zenn argues that BH's "merger" with the Islamic State and Shekau's pledge to al-Baghdadi is not a sudden tactical opportunistic decision but, based on the organization's history and evolution, rather "a strategic, calculated, and long-term decision coming from the top of the Boko Haram leadership and communications structure." [23]

However, Zenn notes that the announcement came at a time when Boko Haram was facing a large-scale military offensive by Nigeria's army and the armed forces of neighboring countries launched in February 2015, which forced the organization to abandon territories it had controlled in northeastern Nigeria since mid-2014.[24] The Chadian army has made a particularly large contribution to the campaign, expelling BH fighters from several parts of Borno state in Nigeria and seized control of the town of Dikwa, about 50km southwest of the Nigerian border.[25]

Despite BH's pledge of allegiance, it is clear that there was no merger between Boko Haram and the Islamic State. Assaf Moghadam, who recently proposed a typology of terrorist inter-group cooperation, defines mergers as "the most complete type of cooperation because they entail the unification of the collaborating groups' command and control structure, the integration of their fighting forces, and the pooling of their resources." [26] The BH-IS relationship does not enter in this category, at least for now.

It is not even a real strategic alliance, which would entail extensive share of know-how and resources and possibly exchange of fighters, while retaining "ownership of respective assets as well as distinct command and control over their organizations." It is even doubtful that the BH-IS partnership involves "a high degree of ideological overlap and a general agreement on strategic issues." It resembles more to a tactical alliance "based on shared interests" or a temporary "marriage of convenience" which is not sure to endure.[27]

No doubt Shekau's alignment with al-Baghdadi is the most important move in the competition between AQ and IS since Ansar Bayt al Maqdis (ABM) has sworn allegiance to the Islamic State in November 2014 and rebranded itself Wilayat (province) Sinai. Shekau is the first well-known jihadist leader to openly join al-Baghdadi, and the alliance with Boko Haram is boosting IS's global profile.

It should be noted, however, that "the alliance" between BH and IS comes on the background of the success of regional players like Chad and Niger to defeat Boko Haram forces on their turf and several setbacks of the Islamic State in Syria (Kobani) and in Iraq (Tikrit) and its attempts to return as a major military actor in western Syria and near the capital Damascus.

The reasons for Shekau's *volte face* in favor of his allegiance to IS are not clear. His strong, boastful, fearless personality, his pretention to be a learned theologian, his decision to declare the establishment of a Caliphate across the land under BH control almost at the same time as the IS Caliphate, are a stark contrast to his decision to take the *bay`ah* to al-Baghdadi. It is of note that in the *Dabiq* #8, where the BH pledge of allegiance is presented in the chapter "The Bay`ah from West Africa," Shaykh Abū Bakr Shekau is mentioned only once, his photo is not too flattering and his name is not mentioned on it, contrary to many other less important

persons posted in *Dabiq*. [28]

On the strategic military level, BH needs more the cooperation with AQIM, still loyal to AQ and al-Zawahiri, active on the Libyan, Algerian and Tunisian territory (much closer to Nigeria) and controlling part of the huge weapons arsenal the BH would need to defend its territory from the attacks by the regional coalition.

It could be that Shekau emulates Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who in 2004 obtained bin Laden's nomination as emir of AQ in Iraq but immediately proclaimed himself as emir of al-Sham (Levant), responsible for the jihadi forces in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine and acting practically independently of AQ's leadership until his death in 2006.

Shekau now needs the international jihadi legitimacy offered by IS, and perhaps also some financing, but it remains to be seen how long he will resist the temptation to be regarded as the real caliph of West Africa, or if he will be able to resist the military onslaught by regional forces and the new Nigerian government.

On February 9 2015, a video attributed to Ansaru was posted on YouTube. The video criticizes Boko Haram because it "launches physical and bomb attacks at Muslims and public places such as mosques, markets, and motor parks . . . contrary to the teachings of Islam." Ansaru has long been critical of Shekau and his fighters but recently its verbal attacks on Boko Haram have become more frequent while the group is attempting to portray itself as the true defender of local Muslims, just as al-Qaeda groups have elsewhere around the globe. [29] This means AQ still has some foothold, even minimal, in northern Nigeria and neighboring French-speaking states.

### **Conclusion**

It was al-Zawahiri who predicted in his December 2001 book *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner* that "[victory for the Islamic movements against the world alliance cannot be attained unless these movements possess an Islamic base in the heart of the Arab region." [30]

In the conclusion of my 2005 book "Coalitions between Terrorist Organizations: Revolutionaries, Nationalists and Islamists", I pondered whether Islamists could challenge the U.S. and its allies, perhaps by taking control of a Muslim state. Only four countries seemed vulnerable, at that time, to such a scenario:

1. Pakistan, which has a nuclear arsenal and large radical Islamist movements that control part of its territory;
2. Indonesia, because of its large Muslim population, a territory of some 17,000 islands and jungles, political and economical instability (at the time), and a small but active Islamist terrorist organization;
3. Saudi Arabia, led by a corrupt and ineffective regime, with huge oil wealth, where Islamist movements are influenced by Wahhabi ideologues;
4. Iraq, whose internal stability and even integrity is in danger after the U.S. occupation, with the threat of Shi'a radicalism emerging in force after the destruction of the Sunni Ba'athist infrastructure.

I evaluated that as al-Qaeda has chosen to focus its campaign against the U.S. in Iraq and has enlisted all Islamist forces there, it is possible that the future balance of power between radical and moderate Islam, between the radical Islamist camp and its Western and Eastern enemies will be decided on the Iraqi battlefield. [31]

By establishing the Islamic State, ISIS has fulfilled al-Zawahiri's condition while it is fighting his authority

over the jihadist camp.

Although AQIS's first major terrorist venture—the September 6, 2014 attempt to hijack two Pakistan Navy frigates and use them to attack U.S. and Indian vessels—failed, the competition between AQ and IS continues on all fronts.

IS has achieved three main territorial successes: the alignment on its side by Ansar Bayt al Maqdis (Wilayah Sinai), Boko Haram (Wilayah West Africa) and the ISIS stronghold in Derna, Libya (Wilayah Barqa).

Al-Qaeda's authority is still valued by AQAP in Yemen, al-Shabaab in Somalia and AQIM in North Africa. It is not yet clear what AQIS is representing in terms of territorial control, resources and fighters, and if it is not in fact the only group rallied around the AQ leadership in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

AQAP, which already was the major actor among the AQ franchises, could become, on the backdrop of the Yemeni civil war and its potential territorial gains, the strongest contestant to the Islamic State and Caliph Ibrahim.

However, IS can boast that it recruited in its ranks the highest number, some 71%, of the 25,000 foreign fighters, mainly from Arab, Muslim and Western countries, who are fighting in Syria and Iraq, according to recent United Nations' estimates. [32] According to EU Justice Commissioner Vera Jouriva some 5,000-6,000 Europeans are fighting with jihadist groups in Syria.[33] A report by the French Parliament estimates that 1,430 French nationals have traveled to join jihadist groups in territory held by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, representing 47% of the European militants there, a somehow different estimate. [34] For the moment many of them serve as cannon fodder, fighters or suicide bombers in Iraq and Syria.

These represent a significant threat, as experienced lately in France, Belgium, Tunisia or Libya. The more IS or AQAP, al-Shabaab or Boko Haram will be squeezed militarily on the territory they currently hold, the more of their fighters will disperse to their countries of origin or other target states.

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## Notes

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- [14] Ibid.
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- [16] Thomas Joscelyn, "Boko Haram leader pledges allegiance to the Islamic State," *Long War Journal*, March 8, 2015, at <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/boko-haram-leader-pledges-allegiance-to-the-islamic-state.php>.
- [17] Thomas Joscelyn, "Islamic State spokesman publicly accepts Boko Haram's allegiance," *Long War Journal*, March 13, 2015, at <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/islamic-state-publicly-accepts-boko-harams-allegiance.php>. It should be mentioned that already in its Dabiq Magazine #5 (Remaining and Expanding) of November 2014 ISIS mentions its acceptance of the pledged allegiance to the Khalifah by a number of groups in Khurāsān, al-Qawqāz, Indonesia, Nigeria, the Philippines, and elsewhere," without mentioning BH by name. See the magazine at <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-issue-5-remaining-and-expanding.pdf>.
- [18] Ibid.
- [19] Suranjan Weeraratnea, "Theorizing the Expansion of the Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 19 Mar 2015, at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2015.1005742#.VSi3Zq0cR1s>
- [20] Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram, Islamic State and the Archipelago Strategy," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 12, Issue 24, The Jamestown Foundation, December 19, 2014.
- [21] Ibid. Ansaru is a new militant group, close to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), formed in 2012 in northwestern Nigeria, which differs from Boko Haram ideologically, tactically, and geographically. Zenn distinguishes between three Ansaru groups: the "GSPC network," the "AQIM network" and the "Middle Belt network."
- [22] Ibid.
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- [26] Assaf Moghadam, "Terrorist Affiliations in Context: A Typology of Terrorist Inter-Group Cooperation," *CTC Sentinel*, March 19, 2015, at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/terrorist-affiliations-in-context-a-typology-of-terrorist-inter-group-cooperation>.
- [27] Ibid. These definitions appear in Moghadam's typology.
- [28] Dabiq (The Shari'ah Alone Will Rule Africa), #8, March 2015, pp. 14-16.
- [29] Thomas Joscelyn, "Jihadist divisions grow in Nigeria," *Long War Journal*, February 23, 2015, at <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/jihadist-divisions-grow-in-nigeria.php>. Joscelyn probably refers to the Ansaru "Middle Belt network" the only network using the Ansaru name. According to Jacob Zenn, the third Ansaru network was the "Middle Belt network," which included mid-level recruits who supported the more experienced "GSPC network" and "AQIM network" masterminds and were often aggrieved Nigerian Muslims from states that experienced Muslim-Christian violence. See note 23.
- [30] See citation in Ely Karmon, *Coalitions between Terrorist Organizations: Revolutionaries, Nationalists and Islamists*, (Leiden, Netherlands, and Boston, MA:



Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2005), p. 389.

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