

## The Islamic State and its Intentions for Africa

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As part of the Islamic State's aspiration to expand globally, the Nigerian Boko Haram, which was the first organization to express its desire to unite with the Islamic State, was selected as its regional representative for West Africa, and thus its pledge of allegiance was accepted. During the preparations for the official announcement of the merger between the two, Boko Haram's leader, Abu Bakar Shekau, gave the *bay'ah* to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This was followed by a declaration several days later by the Islamic State spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, that the Nigerian organization was endorsed as an official province, designated as the Islamic State in West Africa. This unification process can serve as an example of the Islamic State's formation of its alliances with its other subordinates. It reflects the motives that underlie each side's eagerness for the alliance, and it also enables a better understanding of the Islamic State's intentions in Africa overall.

Boko Haram was founded in 2009 in northeastern Nigeria by a Muslim cleric named Muhammad Yousuf. Yousuf sought to create an Islamic state in this region based on the *sharia* (Islamic law); significantly, some of the group's members had begun operations for this purpose years earlier. The organization's official name was Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad (the Sunni Group for Islamic Preaching and Holy War); today it is widely known as Boko Haram, which means "Western education is forbidden." Following a violent clash between the organization's operatives and police forces in 2009, hundreds of members of the organization were arrested and their leader was executed. Abu Bakar Shekau, the organization's deputy leader, was appointed in his place. Shekau swore to avenge the death of his leader and to wage a total war against the Nigerian government and the

state's institutions, and in 2010 the organization began to launch terrorist operations in Nigeria.<sup>1</sup>

After his nomination as the new leader, Shekau declared his support for al-Qaeda and Bin Laden, the renowned leader of the global jihad camp at the time.<sup>2</sup> As part of his efforts to tighten his links with the global jihad organization, Shekau wrote some letters addressed to Bin Laden that were found after the latter's death in May 2011 at his home in Abbottabad, Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> Boko Haram also maintained ties with al-Qaeda's other branches, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Shabaab in Somalia. These connections were reflected in the aid Boko Haram received from them in military training, manpower, and equipment.<sup>4</sup> For its part, the Nigerian organization sent its fighters to assist the branch of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in the clashes in Mali in 2011.<sup>5</sup>

The influence of al-Qaeda on Boko Haram's operations was already apparent in 2011, when the Nigerian organization adopted the al-Qaeda inspired tactic of suicide bombings. Since its first use by Boko Haram in June 2011, it has become a common tactic in the organization's repertoire. Boko Haram has launched nearly 200 suicide bombings in the last four and a half years, mostly in Nigeria, with some in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.<sup>6</sup> The first suicide attacks on the police station and the UN building in the Nigerian capital of Abuja carried out by Boko Haram were assisted with guidance by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which may have supplied Boko Haram with the explosives for the attacks.<sup>7</sup> The Nigerian organization seems also to have received training from al-Qaeda's branches in its propaganda and communications activities. This influence can be seen in the rhetoric used by Shekau and his threats toward Western countries, with an emphasis on the United States, and against Israel.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Boko Haram's ties with al-Qaeda branches, the organization was not officially accepted as part of the al-Qaeda network of alliances. Presumably Boko Haram's conduct did not fit the strategy of Bin Laden, or that of his successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, particularly because of the Nigerian organization's *takfiri* policy (declaring Muslims to be heretics, which sanctions killing them). Al-Qaeda leaders also objected to Boko Haram's indiscriminate attacks against innocent Muslims, fearing a loss of support from Muslims around the world. In addition, the undisguised ambition of Boko Haram's leader to declare the establishment of an Islamic emirate in northeastern Nigeria opposed Bin Laden's position, which argued that the

timing was not appropriate for such a move.<sup>9</sup> However, due to the relations between Boko Haram and al-Qaeda's branches and to the absence of any alternatives, the Nigerian organization continued to support al-Qaeda. This situation changed with the appearance of ISIS, which later became the Islamic State, and especially after the announcement on June 29, 2014 of the newly established caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph.

The first sign of Boko Haram's weakening support for al-Qaeda and its intention to unite with the Islamic State and be part of its caliphate came shortly after this announcement. In July 2014, Boko Haram's leader expressed his support for the Islamic caliphate and al-Baghdadi, whom he called the "leader of all Muslims everywhere." At this stage, Shekau did not officially abandon the al-Qaeda camp, and still expressed his support of al-Zawahiri and the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar.<sup>10</sup> Addressing al-Baghdadi as the "leader of all Muslims," however, reflected Boko Haram's support for the establishment of the caliphate by the Islamic State, and its inclination to accept al-Baghdadi as the new leader of the global jihad. Another expression of Boko Haram's support for the idea of the caliphate was indicated by Shekau's announcement in August 2014 of the establishment of an Islamic emirate in northeastern Nigeria over an area of 50,000 square kilometers.<sup>11</sup> This declaration reflected Shekau's own intention to be recognized as an emir of the Islamic state in Nigeria, and highlighted Boko Haram's strength, as it would be portrayed as the preferred representative of the Islamic State in West Africa. The Nigerian organization appeared to be at the peak of its power in late 2014, and a declaration that an Islamic emirate was established in a large territory constituted a significant projection of power and enabled Shekau to display his qualifications as emir – not only in theory, but also in practice. The Islamic State's response was swift: in September 2014, *Dabiq*, the Islamic State's English-language propaganda magazine, published its conditions for accepting loyalty from various organizations, and mentioned Boko Haram as a potential candidate to fulfill that position.<sup>12</sup>

The effect of Boko Haram's warming ties with the Islamic State became apparent in October 2014, and was expressed in changes in the Nigerian organization's media activity, manifested in video clips distributed by Boko Haram over the internet. The video clips were inspired by Islamic State videos: from the display of the black flag, which serves as the symbol identified with the Islamic State, to the high quality videos that were screened. These indicators supported the assessment that the Islamic State was assisting the

Nigerian organization in improving its communication capabilities.<sup>13</sup> The Islamic State also assisted the Nigerian organization in establishing its own professional media division. As part of this effort, an Islamic State social media specialist was assigned to assist Boko Haram. In January 2015 this operative created a Twitter account for the Nigerian organization and began distributing Boko Haram's messages, some of which were also distributed through the personal accounts of Islamic State operatives and on the official Islamic State media channels. This enabled the Islamic State to monitor the messages sent in the name of Boko Haram and ensure they were acceptable to the Islamic State policy. A month later, Boko Haram was entrusted with managing the Twitter account, which became the official voice for the Islamic State in West Africa.<sup>14</sup>

When the conditions were ripe for a union between the two, the Islamic State sent a team to Nigeria in February 2015 to negotiate the terms of Boko Haram's declaration of loyalty.<sup>15</sup> When the negotiations were concluded on March 7, 2015, the Nigerian organization swore allegiance to the caliphate and its leader, Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>16</sup> On March 12 the Islamic State made an announcement accepting this declaration of loyalty.<sup>17</sup> As part of the completion of the union between Boko Haram and the Islamic State, the latter published a video clip in late April 2015 announcing that the name of the Nigerian organization had been changed to Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), and that it had been integrated into the emerging Islamic caliphate.<sup>18</sup>

The union between Boko Haram and the Islamic State took place at a time when the Nigerian organization was under attack by a multinational military offensive headed by Nigeria and a coalition of countries in the region. This resulted in Boko Haram losing most of the territory it had controlled, and putting it at risk of defeat.<sup>19</sup> Following the union with the Islamic State, Boko Haram's capabilities improved. These improvements were reflected in a broader scope of activity and in the effectiveness and geographic deployment of its attacks. These changes positioned the Nigerian organization as a regional threat that had to be destroyed and demanded a comprehensive effort on the part of all the countries in the region. These countries formed a multinational force led by new Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim who was elected in late March 2015, when he defeated incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian who had ruled Nigeria since 2010.

For the Islamic State, accepting Boko Haram into its system of alliances gave the Islamic State its first substantial foothold in West Africa that enabled its ultimate goal to expand the caliphate globally. In addition, the union with the Nigerian organization provides the Islamic State with territorial contiguity with its northern districts in Africa, including Libya and Algeria, while extending its influence to additional African countries. The implementation of this can already be seen in Boko Haram's suicide bombings outside Nigeria, which began only in 2015.<sup>20</sup>

As part of its expansion in Africa, the Islamic State it is also trying to extend the caliphate to East Africa, hoping to do this by recruiting the Somali organization al-Shabaab,<sup>21</sup> even though the Somali organization has become allied to al-Qaeda since February 2012.<sup>22</sup> Al-Shabaab, known for its internal disputes that led to assassinations within the organization in the past – that may also have contributed to the assassination of its leader Ahmed Abdi Godane, in September 2014<sup>23</sup> – is now embroiled in an internal dispute over whether to maintain its loyalty to al-Qaeda or to switch its allegiance to the Islamic State. Al-Shabaab's current leadership is making efforts to silence the voices calling on it to shift its alliance from al-Qaeda to the Islamic State in order to avoid a split. However, a union with the Islamic State, which has gained a worldwide reputation as victorious, identifies with the caliphate vision, and enjoys a wide range of resources and materials, is very tempting for the Somali organization, or at least for some of its members. For the Islamic State, this union, if successful – beyond the territorial advantage – could constitute a significant triumph in its struggle with al-Qaeda for leadership of the global jihad, a struggle that is also underway in Africa. The dissolution of the alliance between the Somali al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda is also likely to undermine al-Qaeda's alliances with its other branches, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, both of which are closely linked to the Somali organization.

In conclusion, at the present time Boko Haram is the central player in the Islamic State's strategy in West Africa. Nonetheless, the Islamic State is striving to expand its influence in East Africa and attract additional organizations, such as al-Shabaab in Somalia, in order to convince them to shift their loyalty to the Islamic State camp. Salafi organizations in North Africa are also included among the ranks of the Islamic State, especially in Libya and Tunisia. The Islamic State's decision to adopt this strategy is, to a large extent, a direct consequence of the rivalry within the global jihadi

camp, and is designed to unravel al-Qaeda's system of alliances, in order to establish and consolidate the Islamic State's leading role.

Despite what appears to be the Islamic State's momentum of success in parts of Africa, Boko Haram, its main representative in West Africa, also suffers from internal rivalries and unstable leadership, and faces a united and well integrated regional offensive. Therefore, there is no certainty of its success and achieving absolute loyalty to the Islamic State. In addition, al-Qaeda, the Islamic State's sworn enemy, has not given up on the struggle with the Islamic State over the leadership of the jihadi camp in Africa. This competition leaves an opening for countermeasures by the regional coalition, in cooperation with the international Western coalition, aimed at driving a wedge between the two organizations, increasing the friction between them, and weakening them in order to defeat them. At the same time, the African continent will almost certainly continue to be a key region for terrorism by both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the coming years, and the campaign against them is not expected to be easy or quick.

## Notes

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