

## **Linkages Between Boko Haram and al Qaeda: A Potential Deadly Synergy**

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### **Abstract**

Since 11 Sept 2001, the United States has been active throughout the world targeting the various clusters engaged in global Salafi jihad. One group, Boko Haram, was largely ignored in this fight and quite recently has taken an ominous turn in regards to both its tactics and its strategy, betraying linkages to al Qaeda and threatening United States strategic interests. Many analysts and commentators have dismissed the option that Boko Haram will merge with al Qaeda, instead speculating that since no announcement of union was made after initial talks, that the connections between the groups will remain limited. Investigating Boko Haram's goals and motives and comparing said goals and motives with other groups that were officially accepted into al Qaeda betrays a disturbing similarity as well as a similar time horizon. This paper encourages active United States engagement in crafting holistic policy to both dismantle Boko Haram before a merger can take place, while simultaneously stabilizing Nigeria to improve security and prevent other groups from developing.

**Key Words:** Boko Haram, al Qaeda, Nigeria, AQIM, Niger Delta, Salafi jihad

### **Introduction**

On 21 Jan 2012, a series of news reports trickled in. The earliest casualty reports said seven had died (Elbagir & John, 2012a), before escalating to 156 dead and over 50 wounded (Elbagir & John, 2012b). The final tally surpassed 200 fatalities (Shuaibu & Julius, 2012) due to eight explosions rocking the city of Kano, striking barracks, police stations, passport offices, immigration offices, and the state security headquarters, with Boko Haram contacting The Daily Trust by phone to claim credit (Elbagir & John, 2012b). The official claims of responsibility from Imam Abu Muhammad Abu Bakr bin Muhammad (Shekau) opened with this statement:

*In the name of Allah, Peace and Mercy! We are the group called 'forbidden' that is Boko Haram but we love to call ourselves Jama'atu Ahlissunnah Liddaawati wal Jihad* ("Nigeria: More", 2012).

But this was not Boko Haram's first attack, nor will it be their last. It is merely the most recent simultaneous bombing that they have claimed credit for. On Tuesday 17 Jan 2012, acting on actionable intelligence, the Nigerian Joint Task Force captured six "high ranking" members of Boko Haram and defused five bombs scattered about the city of Maiduguri ("Nigerian Manhunt", 2012). On 25 Dec 2011, a series of simultaneous explosions rocked Nigeria, striking the Saint Theresa Catholic Church in Madalla, an evangelical church in Jos, as well as another church and a secret police headquarters in Yobe ("Christmas Day", 2011). Multiple coordinated

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bombings in multiple cities betrayed a new level of precision for the group. The primary suspect in the 2011 Christmas attacks, Kabiru Sokoto, managed to escape detention during transportation, creating concerns that the security system has been infiltrated by Boko Haram (“Top Suspect”, 2012). The Inspector General of Police, Hafiz Ringim, was obligated to provide an explanation for the escape (“Nigerian Manhunt”, 2012).

The initial strike that indicated a change in tactical and strategic trajectory was the 26 Aug 2011 bombing of the United Nations building in Abuja (Cook, 2011). Prior to this, the group had largely been a domestic guerrilla movement focused on internal change. This bombing would represent an ominous shift in tactics towards a more international Salafist worldview. The concerns of verbal overtures and potential tactical linkages between Boko Haram and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb are tangible enough to attract the attention of General Carter Ham, Head of Africom (Joselow, 2011) as well as Secretary General Ban Ki-moon of the United Nations and Boni Yayi, Chairman of the African Union (Ogbu, 2012).

While verbal overtures were made between the two groups, no official linkage was ever made, and many have discarded Boko Haram as a potential al Qaeda affiliate. This paper posits that Boko Haram is not only an ideal fit for al Qaeda, but is actively in the process of becoming a franchise. Therefore, the goal is to ascertain Boko Haram’s role in the context of global Salafi Jihad and al Qaeda in particular, with special importance placed on United States strategic interests, in order to determine an appropriate and effective course of action.

### **Boko Haram’s Operating Environment**

Before delving directly into Boko Haram, it is important to place the group inside Nigeria’s larger context of varying social, economic, religious, and political factors in order to have a more nuanced understanding of why the group exists and where it is possibly headed. It is within this environment of challenges and enablers that Boko Haram operates, finds sanctuary, and draws recruits.

The economic system in Nigeria faces a substantial number of challenges which has translated into open protests to influence the political system – as of 2005, 70% of the population lived in absolute poverty of less than \$1/day (Hill, 2010; International Crisis Group, 2011) with approximately 70%-80% of Northerners unemployed (Hill, 2010). There are three primary triggers identified thusly: economic/demographic growth disequilibrium, increasing wealth disparities, and an increase in rent-seeking behaviors (Hill, 2010).

A failure to diversify away from the petroleum sector has contributed to this economic devolution (International Crisis Group, 2010) as more of the nation became dependent upon the profits of petrodollars, with revenue at \$74 billion/year (International Crisis Group, 2011), while simultaneously clamoring for either more state welfare or a larger part of the “fair share”.

Simultaneously, there is a certain degree of strategic value for all nations as Nigeria contributes approximately 3% of the world’s daily petroleum supply (Hill, 2010). By 2015, West Africa is projected to provide 25% of the United States’ oil imports (Le Sage, 2010) and Nigeria is currently the 4<sup>th</sup> largest contributor of oil to the US (Sayne, 2011).

While oil output has grown from 1.1 million barrels per day and 2.25% of the world supply in 1971 (Hill, 2010) to current levels, the economy itself has contracted by -0.1%/year

from 1975 to 2005 (Hill, 2010). This creates a certain degree of instability as insurgent groups such as MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta) attack petroleum infrastructure to exact political and economic change on behalf of the South (where the oil is produced); conversely, failure to then diversify economically leaves the North further and further impoverished. As groups become more frustrated, they will by nature seek to lash out at the perceived cause of their grievance; while no Northern groups have attacked the petroleum infrastructure yet, they have planned to do so and have made statements accordingly (as will be covered later in this paper). The difference between groups like MEND and groups like Boko Haram vis-à-vis petroleum infrastructure is their motive for attacks; MEND strikes the infrastructure to achieve economic and political capitulations, whereas Boko Haram has a goal of severe structural damage to create economic shocks for the West (Campbell, 2010). This slight tactical difference is attributed to their specific insurgent natures and goals. MEND is a reformist insurgency by nature, seeking to enact political and economic change (O'Neill, 2005), whereas Boko Haram is an ideologically driven reactionary-traditionalist insurgency and therefore largely uncompromising and dogmatic (O'Neill, 2005).

Coupled with these economic challenges are the political challenges created by rampant endemic political bribery and corruption at the local level (Hill 40). There is an endemic culture of political corruption, resulting in fraud and coercion, with two possible outcomes: cheat and win or abide by the rules and lose (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010; International Crisis Group, 2011). Typically, this election-related violence and intimidation is organized and accelerated via simple text messages (Kwaja, 2011). This translates into a populace increasingly hostile and distrustful of the government

Residential classification as a political tool only serves to fuel the violence (Sayne, 2011) with the “indigene” system of residential registration pitting “indigenous” residents against “settlers”; there is potential for disenfranchisement across the board, but also elevated tensions in mixed sectors of the population, such as the central belt of Nigeria (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010). This tension is used as a way to divide the populace, limiting resources and gerrymandering the political process (Kwaja, 2011; Sayne, 2011).

These problems are only exacerbated at the national level as power-sharing agreements known as “Zoning” between the North and South provide tenuous stability – assuming nothing goes wrong (Campbell, 2010; Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010). Consequently, the passing of President Yar’Adua and the transfer of power to Vice President Goodluck Jonathan resulted in elevated tensions and fits of sporadic violence during the 2011 elections. While this specific elevated tension was due to the power transfer and Zoning, the previously-mentioned underlying political frustrations were already present. Consequently, only 35% of the population believes elections are “free and fair” (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010), and quite often they become violent, as evidenced by the 700 dead in Jos following the 2008 elections (Campbell, 2010).

An acute symptom of the underlying political frustrations and distrust are the occasional and highly visible rioting that occurs. A more diffuse symptom is that religious, social, or ethno-cultural groups step in to fill the governance void. A relatively benign example is the Sufi schools which are found in the north. On the other hand, governance failures are often how extremist groups have historically taken hold, resulting in political gains, as exemplified by Hizballah in Lebanon and HAMAS in Palestine (Council on Foreign Relations, 2010; Council on Foreign Relations, 2011). Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has also found traction with the

local populace by providing needed security and access to necessities such as fuel and medicine (Thornberry & Levy, 2012). As such, Nigeria should be wary of its political failings, it creates a void that necessarily must be filled – by whom is the question. Unfortunately the answer is simple and appears to mimic the rest of the world, as Islamic extremists in Africa also fill the security and power voids (Devlin-Foltz, 2010). Filling those gaps provides both legitimacy and a bully pulpit for ideology which then takes root and grows.

On the other end of the spectrum is the educational system in the North. It is largely dependent upon religious groups such as the Sufi *Qadiriyya* and *Tijaniyya*, both of which provide educational support at all levels, coupled with Quranic reading (for both adults and children) which is socially conservative, but modern; moreover, their respective leaders have high levels of media visibility, giving them substantial community influence (Hill, 2010). Unfortunately, illiteracy and poverty continue to permeate society (Adesoji, 2011), despite the best efforts of the social groups and in part due to failings of the government.

From a political standpoint, religion first started to weave its way into the discourse in the late 1970s in the North in order to create a Federal Shariah Court of Appeal as part of the Constitution (Adesoji, 2011). One of the major contributing causes for the push for Shariah was local allegations that the national government had failed to maintain order and law; the resultant effect was the creation of *Hisbah* which were roving religious militias whose task was to enforce Shariah violations (Devlin-Foltz, 2010; International Crisis Group, 2010). Another prime motivator for the implementation of Shariah law is its historic application in the region (International Crisis Group, 2010). Shariah, implemented as a method of fighting corruption, became a way of unifying the masses with the elites (International Crisis Group, 2010). This becomes especially significant in that the intelligentsia typically provides direction for the mobilized masses in insurgent warfare – often both groups are necessary for insurgency to reach fruition (O'Neill, 2005).

Despite the issues mentioned in this paper, Nigeria's security challenges are largely small and localized. As a whole it is one of the more secure nations in Africa, contributing much towards regional security (Sayne, 2011). Generally the North is calm and incidences of violence should not depict the area as restive or unstable as a whole (International Crisis Group, 2010). Having stated that caveat, the reader should not be disabused of the potential risks involved.

### **The Challenges of Nigeria's Domestic Instability**

Religious fundamentalism and the politicization thereof began in the late 1970s, but really became an upward trend in the 1980s, correlating with the Maitatsine Salafist uprisings (Adesoji, 2011) which occurred in Kano, Kaduna, Bulumkutu, Yola, and Bauchi states, under the control of a Kano resident of Cameroon-origins named Muhammadu Marwa (Adesoji, 2011). This uprising featured Nigeria's Northern urban poor, who were often immigrants from the Sahel – Chad, Niger, Cameroon (Adesoji, 2011). The Maitatsine uprisings themselves were initially influenced by the Salafist Shia movements of decades prior and which Boko Haram's Mohammed Yusuf was a component (Adesoji, 2011). Therefore the Salafist undercurrent in Nigeria is not tied to any particular sect of Islam; moreover, the outlook is pan-Islamic in nature in the North, with empathy for other Muslim groups throughout the world (International Crisis Group, 2010). Where there is divergence is that some Northern Muslims admire the West's religious diversity while others view the West as immoral and sinful, indicating that the North as

a whole is not necessarily Salafist or global in nature, but certain distinct portions are (International Crisis Group, 2010).

There are actually a great many influences in Nigeria other than the overly-simplistic “Muslim North” and “Christian South”. The North, while conservative, is not radical: “if anything, Nigeria is a hotbed of Islamic moderation,” (Schwartz, 2010) and is generally dominated by the religiously moderate, albeit socially conservative, Sufi groups *Qadiriyya* and *Tijaniyya* (Hill, 2010) although many Sunni and a few Shia groups have cropped up in the area. Chief among them in relation to concerns for US policy are the Salafist groups such as *Izala* (*Jama'atul Izalatul Bid'ah Wa'ikhamatul Sunnah*), MIR (Movement for the Islamic Revival - *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jama'a, Ja'amutu Tajidmul Islami*), IMN (Islamic Movement in Nigeria), and Boko Haram, which generally do not coordinate activities (Hill, 2010). Given that they all have different goals and are of varying size, they necessitate differing responses. Boko Haram is simply one of many within a fragmented insurgent system. While the Northern groups are much smaller and religious/ideological in nature (Gruenbaum, 2009; Schwartz, 2010), Southern groups such as MEND are much more along the lines of traditional economic insurgent guerrilla armies, boasting strength of some 10,000 armed members (Gruenbaum, 2009). The distinction is that insurgent groups with economic and political grievances can generally be mollified, while those that are ideologically driven generally cannot.

Boko Haram first began to appear in 2002 and quickly acquired the moniker of “Nigerian Taliban” with initial leadership under Mohammed Yusuf (Cook, 2011; Hill, 2010) and with a stated goal of a Shariah state in Nigeria (Adesoji, 2011; Joselow, 2011). Its violent trajectory involved riots and clashes with the police in 2004 and again in 2009 with an assault on a Bauchi State police station in which over 700 perished (Hill, 2010). Interestingly enough, this four day period of violence was triggered by a raid in Dutsen Tenshin, Bauchi by a joint security team (Adesoji, 2011). It was shortly after this engagement that Mohammed Yusuf died, however rumors are rampant as to whether he was killed in conflict, in police custody (Cook, 2011; Schwartz, 2010), or during an escape (Hill, 2010). Given Boko Haram’s methodology and given Nigeria’s often heavy-handed tactics and government/security corruption, any of the potential rumors are plausible.

Troublingly, the violence is slowly marching South. On 27 Jan 2012, some two dozen individuals were arrested in the southern region’s Enugu state, a far cry from their home, as indicated by license plates on the vehicle from the North’s Zamfara state; allegedly the individuals in question were on a hunting expedition (Isiguzo & Shuaibu, 2012). Furthermore, reports on Wednesday 21 Sept 2011 placed members of Boko Haram in the South, specifically in Warri state, with the intentions of bombing oil infrastructure in the Delta (Francis, 2011).

Unfortunately, its trajectory has changed from domestic to an international flavor with the 2011 bombing of the United Nations Headquarters in Abuja (Joselow, 2011). Boko Haram’s first attack outside of the North occurred on Christmas Eve 2010 in Nigeria’s Middle Belt targeting Jos’ Christian community; these attacks were then followed by New Years Eve strikes on the Army barracks in Abuja (Le Sage, 2011). Boko Haram has not taken credit for all of the attacks in northern Nigeria (“68 Killed”, 2011), perhaps indicating that government officials are eager to place blame in order to show that they are actively and aggressively attempting to provide security.

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What is curious is that Muslim religious leaders in the North such as the Sultan of Sokoto, Sa'ad Abu Bakr, have condemned Boko Haram's violence, while Christian leaders such as Pastor Ayo Oritsejfor have indicated that they may need to arm themselves in self-defense (Loomis, 2011; Oguntola, 2011). Church attendance in the north has since fallen and non-indigenes are quietly migrating out of Kano (Shuaibu & Julius, 2012). This indicates a potential tipping point where community and religious leaders are working at cross purposes, potentially escalating towards sectarian violence amid attempts to deconflict the situation. It is worth noting that where religious leaders of both ideological stripes have called for an end to violence, they generally have been effective in doing so (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010).

Largely, security in Nigeria is handled at the local level without uniform standards and with poor coordination at the national level (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010). Even though it is handled locally, the communication has to be channeled nationally before a response is made – often by text message (Kwaja, 2011)! Consequently, Nigerian political elites in the various states habitually pay armed gangs for protection or to deter attacks. This is generally done to provide local security where there are security failures, but eventually and inevitably the group will turn on its former benefactor (Le Sage, 2010). To some extent, this is a legacy of the *Hisbah* system. The downside is that it creates a bifurcation of the security system and can push moderate political groups towards a religious extreme as they seek a short term solution (Devlin-Foltz, 2010).

This is a challenge considering that there are rumors that Kano's former governor, Malam Ibrahim Shekarau, has bribed Boko Haram with 10 Million Naira (approximately \$64,000-\$65,000) (Isiguzo & Shuaibu, 2012). There are also assertions that former Commissioner Alhaji Buji Foyi of Borno funded Mohammed Yusuf directly (Adesoji, 2011). While these are only allegations, similar rumors exist for many government officials. At best, this undermines the credibility of the government, and at worst provides both funds and a tacit carte blanche for insurgents to operate.

Unlike most terrorists who have no discernible pattern of either education or economic background and may run the gamut from impoverished to wealthy and from high school drop out to PhD, the members of Boko Haram are largely poor Quranic students who work in manual labor, a sort of craft-based labor system hybridized with a Madrassa network for adults (Adesoji, 2011). This statement does merit a caveat: not all members of Boko Haram are poor or undereducated, there are a number of doctors, students, financiers, professors, and others within the professional class who have been sent abroad (Adesoji, 2011); while the larger group provides for foot soldiers, it is this cadre that is operationally dangerous as they make ideal terrorists having lived abroad and able to blend with other communities.

Tying this back to the prior background notes: this craft-based system of education and income was ravaged by oil inflation, but economics is not the underlying root cause; instead, economics is an intensifier of the situation with the main grievance being a distinct hatred of the West (Adesoji, 2011). Where this becomes potentially dangerous is that it creates a system where an aggrieved portion of the population is more than willing to change from a domestic group to an international group and being Salafist in nature, Boko Haram therefore fits into al Qaeda's ideological agenda. More troublesome is that the network nests inside a larger economically frustrated ethno-linguistic group which may at times develop into a reformist economic insurgency. This is not unlike the situation in Mindanao where there are Salafi terror

groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah and the Abu Sayyaf Group tied to al Qaeda hiding within larger insurgent groups such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (International Crisis Group, 2008). The challenge then becomes a larger counterinsurgency problem with an internal counterterrorism goal, with a strategy of separating the two groups to then apply appropriate policy prescriptions. The danger is that missteps can serve to push the two groups closer together, causing both to grow and become more difficult to separate and resolve.

### **Trajectories of Al Qaeda Franchises**

Understanding the larger factors within Nigeria and the particulars of Boko Haram as a group, certain comparisons and contrasts can now be drawn between Boko Haram and the various al Qaeda franchises in order to determine if any potential synergies exist.

Shortly after the 26 Aug 2011 attack on the UN headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Somali Al Qaeda affiliate al Shabaab were linked to Boko Haram (Francis, 2011). These concerns are buttressed by documentation that verbal communications have been made between AQIM and Boko Haram, as well as sightings of a Nigerian leading an al Shabaab cadre; moreover, Mamman Nur, the Boko Haram member responsible for the United Nations bombing executed the attack after arriving home from Somalia (Joselow, 2011). But tactical linkages are not enough. Instead, it's important to explore how each al Qaeda franchise acquired its status to determine if Boko Haram is on the same trajectory.

Al Qaeda in Iraq is one example. Although its leader, Abu Moussab al Zarqawi, was familiar with bin Laden and Zawahiri and had tactical linkages with AQ Central, having been dispatched to Iraq in 2002 at their request (Riedel, 2008), his group, *al Tawhid wal Jihad*, proceeded to bomb both the Jordanian Embassy and the United Nations Headquarters in Iraq in 2003; it was not until 28 Oct 2004 when he requested that his group receive al Qaeda franchise status (Ould Mohamedou, 2011b). The status was verbally granted by bin Laden two months later, and was made official in June of 2006 when *bayaan* was sworn (Ould Mohamedou, 2011b). This indicates a wait time of two years, in addition to the years of prior tactical linkages.

The *Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat* (GSPC) embraced global jihad in the earlier part of the last decade, eventually merging with al Qaeda in 2006 as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Lebovich, 2011), with its signature attack being a bombing of Algeria's UN Headquarters in 2007 (Thornberry & Levy, 2011). In June 2004, Abdelmalek Droukdel assumed command of GSPC and immediately sought ties with al Qaeda via a secret letter sent to Abu Moussab al Zarqawi as well as providing a substantial number of foot soldiers for Iraq (Ould Mohamedou, 2011a). 11 Sept 2006, the five year anniversary of the 9/11 raid and little more than two years after Droukdel reached out to al Qaeda (via Abu Moussab al-Zarqawi and its Iraq franchise), Ayman al-Zawahiri, then AQ's Number Two, released a video recording attesting to their franchising (Thornberry & Levy, 2012). Almost immediately, there was a significant improvement in tactics as well, which involved transitioning away from traditional guerrilla tactics and towards terrorism tactics with a focus on mass casualties and civilian targeting, as well as AQ's signature tandem strikes (Thornberry & Levy, 2012). Much like al Qaeda in Iraq, AQIM had years of tactical linkages and a two year wait before being granted franchise status.

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One of the initial key drivers for the development and eventual radicalization of GSPC was governance failures (Thornberry & Levy, 2012). However, as their ideology developed, it progressed towards both a global Salafi jihad and a rejection of domestic apostate rule (Thornberry & Levy, 2012). This is not unlike Boko Haram's ideological progression.

On Thursday, 09 Feb 2012, Somali terrorist group al Shabaab released a tape from leader Mukhtar Abu al Zubeir pledging allegiance to al Qaeda, and the gesture was officially received in a statement from Ayman al Zawahiri, current leader of al Qaeda (Kelly & Cruickshank, 2012). This is significant in that while the two groups have long had low-level tactical linkages, the initial overture for merger came in the form of an Oct 2009 video recording entitled "At Your Service Osama" (Farrall, 2011; Kelly & Cruickshank, 2012). In the intermediate timeframe, al Shabaab's largely parochial strategy took on a more regional and international overtone. No longer were they content with creating a domestic Salafist regime, but instead were looking outward with new tactics, as evidenced by the simultaneous attacks in Uganda July 2011 (Kelly & Cruickshank, 2012).

But before the merger of al Shabaab with al Qaeda, there was rampant speculation as recently as July 2011 as to whether they would merge. Part of al Shabaab's downside was that it was not necessarily the leading organization in its respective nation and this contributed to its failure to acquire an invitation from AQ (Farrall, 2011). It then unified with Hisbul Islamiyah and adopted a more global outlook, however there was still a perceived downside due to excessive tactics that pushed away the local populations (Farrall, 2011). Analysts again trained their eye on al Shabaab with the death of Osama bin Laden and the ascendance of Ayman al Zawahiri, who has a keener eye on the acquisition of territory (Farrall, 2011). Truly there was considerable debate as to whether or not al Shabaab would merge with al Qaeda, with astute focus on the advantages and disadvantages to both sides.

While al Qaeda is generally considered to be in a very weak state, this merger provided benefits to both parties, translating into an increased profile and potential funding for al Shabaab, and an expansion of geographic footprint and potential basing for al Qaeda. Moreover, with several dozen US citizens at al Shabaab camps, it provides for a situation in which al Qaeda gains access to US passport holders.

Of late AQIM has tended to focus southwards across the Sahel instead of north along the Maghreb/Mediterranean (Le Sage, 2011), putting it on a geographic tack towards Nigeria and Boko Haram. In 2010, an overture of sorts was made, although instead of proceeding from Boko Haram to al Qaeda, it came from AQIM to Boko Haram: "We are ready to train your children to use weapons and will supply them with all we can, including support and men, weapons, ammunitions and equipment, in order to defend our people in Nigeria and respond against the aggression of the Christian minority," (Le Sage, 2011). This overture was reciprocated on 2 Oct 2010 when Muhammed Abu Bakr bin Muhammed al-Shakwa pledged *bayaan* to Droukdel (Guidere, 2011), creating an indirect oath of loyalty to AQ Central (Guidere, 2011).

### **Prognosis for Merger of Boko Haram with Al Qaeda**

Szrom and Harnisch identify the following common traits in all al Qaeda havens: "underdevelopment, incompetent governance, and a citizenry disenfranchised by – or disillusioned with – the central government . . . an environment conducive to al Qaeda's presence



and operations must also have a history of radical Islamism that al Qaeda operatives can exploit,” (Szrom & Harnisch, 2011).

Nigeria fits squarely into Szrom and Harnisch’s pattern of AQ operating environments, excepting the history of radical Islam, although there is a profound level of conservative Islam and a history of Shariah law. With Nigeria, Islam is generally conservative in nature, but it is small groups within the larger community that are Salafi. While they do make the case that Nigeria doesn’t have the Wahhabi and Salafi dominance exhibited in other locales (Szrom & Harnisch, 2011), a Sufi majority is not a disqualifier to AQ franchise status, as exhibited by al Shabaab’s new al Qaeda franchise status in Somalia. Just because the Muslim portion of the nation is predominantly Sufi does not mean the environment is inhospitable to a Salafist agenda in general or al Qaeda in particular. Somalia is a perfect example of a largely Sufi nation which has a group that went from domestic Salafi group to a global jihadi al Qaeda franchise.

In these regards, Nigeria qualifies as a “Distressed Zone” which is defined by an area where “a terrorist group is threatened by government-sponsored military action, often supported by the United States and other regional or Western powers. Groups in such an environment may retain some safe territory and leadership, and limited training, fundraising, and operational capabilities,” (Szrom & Harnisch, 2011). This is an area that is conducive to al Qaeda, but not necessarily ideal.

Boko Haram’s initial stated goal of the abolition of secular apostate governments and a return of Shariah fits into the al Qaeda strategy. Al Qaeda has succinctly stated its goals for Africa; some of those goals entail the removal of apostate regimes in Muslim nations, targeting Nigeria’s petroleum infrastructure to damage the international system, and striking governments that are allied with the West (Le Sage, 2010). Given that those goals dovetail with Boko Haram’s stated goals, and with Boko Haram having since adopted an international outlook (Campbell, 2010), the potential for synergy is there.

Furthermore, a large number of individuals related to the Maitatsine uprising were from the Sahel, and given that AQIM is currently focusing southwards towards the Sahel (Ould Mohamedou, 2011a), there seems to be an intersection of interests and populations between AQIM and Boko Haram, with a shared ideology progressing back to the same region over the course of 30 years. Fairly weak border security for both Nigeria and the region as a whole only facilitate these intersections (Le Sage, 2010).

Strictly speaking, up until 2009, the group’s tactics were generally more guerrilla in nature, striking en masse on police, security, and government facilities before dissipating. After the death of their leader, they spent a brief period of time reconstituting. It is around 2011, with the alleged overtures from AQIM that the tactics shifted to terrorism, favoring civilian targets (the UN, churches). Excepting al Shabaab and AQIM, Boko Haram is the only group in Africa to utilize suicide attacks and release martyrdom videos (Cook, 2011). Indeed, an excerpt from the video of the UN Bomber involves him “asking his family to understand his action, which he said was meant to send a message to the US President ‘and other infidels’,” (CTC Sentinel, 2011). While Mohamed Yusuf had a preference for massed guerrilla attacks, his successor, Abu Muhammad Abu Bakr bin Muhammad (Shekau), has a preference for cellular terrorist raids (Le Sage, 2011).

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Allegedly, members of Boko Haram have received training in Algeria and Mauritania (Adesoji, 2011), two prominent areas of operation for AQIM. More directly, Boko Haram members have allegedly received training directly from AQIM in Niger after AQIM's 2010 overtures towards the group (Ould Mohamedou, 2011a); indeed, there has been a shift in tactics from traditional guerrilla behaviors to that of terrorism (Thornberry & Levy, 2011).

Given the geographic, political, and economic positioning, the convergence of strategy and tactics, and the confluence of similarities in the trajectory of acquiring franchise status, one would be hard-pressed to discard Boko Haram as a potential al Qaeda franchise. Given that the other groups had to wait several years, a "not now" response to Boko Haram is most definitely not a "not ever" response. Instead of discarding the option, analysts should be extra vigilant of the group in the near term.

### Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Whether Boko Haram will become an al Qaeda franchise is unknown. There is a strong probability that it will become one and if so, it will take place within the next year or two, given the available information. Even if Boko Haram does not develop into an al Qaeda franchise, it still presents a strategic economic threat, insofar as Nigeria is a substantial exporter of sweet crude oil to the United States. With the challenges of the past decade and the costs involved of engaging a threat after it has emerged, the United States should take an active and aggressive (if discrete) lead in rolling up Boko Haram.

The difficulty in combating the threat is that the environment is not a collapsed state of lawless anarchy (Somalia), or actively engaged in fighting an insurgency (Philippines), or in a state of war with the United States from which the United States can engage in open military operations or semi-covert counterterrorism raids and drone strikes. Instead, the operating environment is largely rural, with a handful of big cities and a frustrated, but generally relaxed populace within which Boko Haram hides. Indeed the scenario is like a Russian matryoshka doll: a counterterrorism problem nested inside a counterinsurgency problem nested inside a governance problem. As such, policy should be crafted with an eye on addressing all three problems individually and within their context as they relate to each other.

First and foremost, a consulate with Hausa-speaking US diplomats should be established in the North. This cadre should actively work to reduce political corruption and correct the social vacuums, removing social grievances which allow for violent groups to move in and fill the void. This involves improving government transparency to build trust with the population, including phasing out the indigene system which will most likely necessitate modification of Nigeria's Constitution (Kwaja, 2011). Protection of minority rights without infringing upon the majority will also go a long way towards building trust. These steps necessitate better contact and cohesion between national and local level political structures. Financial monitoring systems should also be strengthened with an open approach of preventing political corruption and a discrete approach of monitoring money laundering and criminal fund raising.

The US Government should push to promote the larger Sufi movements which are by nature more moderate. Moves should be made to turn the *Hisbah* system into an actual government entity but strip it of its security component, thus preventing gang-like behavior. This steers it in a direction that can be used for conflict mediation and resolution such as

marriage/divorce counseling, big brothers-big sisters networks, and other social outreach activities that maintain the religious component without conflating it with a security component. Along these lines, accreditation should be required for both religious leaders and educators with an orthodox, moderate, and nationally-directed curriculum, facilitating an improvement in education and a moderation in religion and a separation of the two.

Economic officers and development experts should push Nigeria to diversify its economy away from its dependence on petroleum and the avarice and jealousy that it provokes. To do so, seek development aid to create and stimulate a manufacturing sector in the North. With the majority of the population earning less than \$1/day, this is an attractive enterprise for businesses and would represent an upgrade from the craft-based economy that exists, while being similar enough to be a natural and easy transition. This would of course necessitate an improved security situation in order to attract outside corporations.

Truly, a well-rounded and holistic government approach to security is needed in order to provide stability, deter further violence, and regain the trust of the population. Indeed, brutal suppression of dissent only serves to fuel the larger Northern revolts (Adesoji, 2011). The rule of law must be applied evenly and fairly, with appropriate and prompt arrests and trials (Adesoji, 2011). Failure to adequately train, fund, and deploy law enforcement, security, and intelligence systems at the state level with uniform command, control, and liaison connections at the national level only exacerbates the various challenges due to uneven response. As Boko Haram members may travel between states, elite local officers should cross-train with elite federal officers, who both in turn should be trained by US forces. Intelligence collection (both human and technical) should be appropriately fused and supplied to the law enforcement officers to provide for aggressive but discrete tactical operations.

Nigeria's porous borders further create a security issue with both Hausa ethno-linguistic groups and Sahel-based migrants. This necessitates a fusion between the military and homeland security apparatus in that the military is better equipped to patrol the borders, but internal security systems are appropriate for providing identity documents and tracking the population. A national identification system that replaces the indigene system would go a long way towards both providing for the security needs on the one hand and reducing sectarian tensions on the other hand. Once again, this is something that requires oversight and guidance from the United States.

Regionally, joint special operations and intelligence sharing between nations is obligatory to prevent situations where AQIM and Boko Haram can cross train or exfiltrate across sovereign borders to sanctuary. The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) which features 10 nations (including Nigeria) and is largely designed to defeat AQIM (Le Sage, 2011), should see its role expanded to target Boko Haram as needed; moreover, US training partnerships such as JCET (Joint Combined Exchange and Training) (Le Sage, 2011) should be expanded but remain discrete to reduce visibility, avoiding a possible negative reaction from the general population.

Counterterrorism operations should be highly discrete and intelligence driven targeting leadership nodes and the interdiction of explosives caches, with an eye on not disturbing the populace, which is the focus of nation strengthening and stability. These intelligence collection

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efforts should involve human networks as well as technical and open-source collection given that many of the upticks in violence were coordinated via social media and text message.

Strategically, discretely, and proactively strengthening Nigeria across gamut of social, political, economic, and security metrics serves to enable security and legitimates good governance, while at the same time shifting Muslims away from violence and towards moderation as they realize they have a voice as well as safety and a fair political stake. To some extent, certain flare-ups of violence should be expected. While these can be a good indicator of the level of stability in regards to frequency and intensity, it is important to bear in mind that flare-ups are also historically normal for the region. Efforts should be made to minimize the violence via social education and pre-emptive actions, but not at an inordinate cost given their “normal” nature.

At one end of the spectrum, there is the specter of Boko Haram becoming an international al Qaeda franchise, creating a geographic linkage between AQIM and al Shabaab, with a host of problems involving US passport holders and terrain differing from that of the Sahel or the Horn of Africa. At the other end of the spectrum, the instability can create potential shocks to the world oil price, translating into a global economic downturn. Insofar as al Qaeda is cognizant of economic shocks to the Western world and has stated that one of its goals for Africa is to strike Nigeria’s petroleum infrastructure, the Nigerian delta region creates an attractive domestic target with international implications.

It seems premature to dismiss Boko Haram as an al Qaeda franchise. Although overtures have been made and status was not granted, Boko Haram bears all of the hallmarks of a potential al Qaeda franchise. It is Salafist in nature with a global outlook and demonstrated strikes on the UN Headquarters. Moreover, it fits geographically between Al Shabaab and AQIM and the capability to provide US passport holders and strike Nigeria’s petroleum infrastructure also meshes with al Qaeda’s stated goals. That it is in a traditionally Sufi nation and the franchise status was not granted should not be cause to dismiss the group. Given the prior examples of al Qaeda in Iraq, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and al Shabaab, there are usually tactical linkages and overtures made for several years. Whether this timeframe is a vetting process or a method of security or a business negotiation, or some combination of the above, it is highly likely that Boko Haram is part of that process. The United States should take active and aggressive steps to dismantle Boko Haram and improve Nigeria as a whole.

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