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The Niger-Nigeria border with Boko Haram militants on the far side and the Nigérien Army on the near side.

ISLAMIC STATE DEFEAT IN KOBANE HIGHLIGHTS LONG STRUGGLE AHEAD

James Brandon

The Islamic State endured one of its most significant and high-profile defeats to date in January when it was finally forced to withdraw from the Kurdish-majority Syrian town of Kobane (Ayn al-Arab in Arabic). Kurdish forces announced that they had taken complete control of the town on January 26, ending a siege which had begun in September (Rudaw, January 26). A statement issued by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel – YPG) declared the city to be “completely liberated” and that this “was the free will of the people and the will of humanity that ultimately succeeded in Kobane” before promising to “ultimately liberate Kobane Canton” as well. [1] Meanwhile, a video issued online by the pro-Islamic State Amaq News Agency on the same day showed Islamic State fighters on the edge of town, admitting in Arabic that “we retreated a bit from Ayn al-Islam [Kobane] because of the bombardment and the killing of some brothers,” adding of coalition airstrikes: “They bombarded everything, even motorcycles; they have not left a building standing” (*Daily Star* [Beirut], February 2). The independent, UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that more than 1,000 Islamic State militants had been killed the battle for Kobane (Rudaw, January 26).

Despite this, the defeat of the Islamic State in Kobane ironically illustrates the difficulties involved in defeating the group elsewhere. Kobane was a majority-Kurdish town, meaning that the Islamic State’s mainly Arab fighters lacked a natural local support base. By contrast, in other locations, particularly in their strongholds around Raqqa and Deir el-Zor in Syria, and in Anbar and Nineweh governorates in Iraq, the Islamic State enjoys significant support from local Arab Sunni tribes who feel alienated from these countries’ Shi’a-dominated governments and who can consequently see the Islamic State as a protective and empowering force. Similarly, Kobane’s position abutting

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Fax: (202) 483-8337

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the border with Turkey meant that Kurdish fighters could generally evacuate their wounded and bring in fresh fighters and equipment, even allowing for occasional obstructionism by Turkey; the Islamic State was operating at a considerable distance from its own logistics hubs, with the long access roads to Kobane exposing its fighters to frequent airstrikes. Similarly, the Islamic State has used the Kurdish and coalition focus on Kobane to entrench itself more strongly elsewhere, for instance, constructing a network of trenches in Raqqa.

The challenges involved in combating the Islamic State have been highlighted in other areas during the past month. For instance, on January 27, the Iraqi Shi'a Badr militia announced that all urban areas of Diyala province had been "liberated" from the Islamic State; this, however, was immediately accompanied by claims by Iraq's Sunni vice-president, Osama al-Nujaifi, of numerous crimes and abuses committed by Shi'a militias against Sunni civilians in the region (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 27). Such claims, whether true or not, are likely to give further credence to Islamic State assertions, in both Syria and Iraq, that the organization is protecting Sunnis from Iran-backed Shi'a militias. Similar problems face Kurdish forces seeking to retake ethnically mixed areas around Kirkuk in Iraq. Following Islamic State attacks on areas around the city in the last week of January, a senior official of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Kamal Kirkuk, who had fought on the frontlines, said "some of the local Arabs" had been supportive of the Islamic State while "some Arabs were shooting at the Peshmerga forces from behind" during Kurdish counter-attacks (Rudaw, February 4). This underlines the paradox that those forces best able to counter the Islamic State, namely Kurdish armed groups and various Iranian-backed militias, are also those most liable to drive Sunni Arabs into the arms of the Islamic State.

In this context, Iraqi government plans to create a "national guard" force and to foster an anti-Islamic State alliance among Arab Sunni tribes, with the eventual aim of retaking Mosul and other areas, seem unlikely to bear fruit in the immediate future (*al-Arabiya*, February 3; *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 27, February 3). At the same time, however, as shown by failure of the Islamic State's predecessor, the Islamic State in Iraq, during the 2006-2010 period, the group is potentially vulnerable not only to external pressure, but to the consequences of its own extremist ideology. As demonstrated by the recent, filmed immolation of a captured Jordanian Air Force pilot, the Islamic State's actions now seem increasingly focused on appealing to its own extremist Salafi-Jihadist followers, acting out its ideological fixation with creating a pseudo-medieval state and undertaking spectacular acts of gruesomely choreographed violence to terrify its enemies. Such a focus on ideological fidelity at the expense of state-

building, along with its abandonment of its previous attempts to win over disillusioned moderate Sunnis, may yet prove to be the cause of the group's ultimate undoing.

Note

1. "For the Press and Public Opinion," People's Defense Units - General Command, January 26, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/PeoplesDefenseUnits/posts/400249066766984:0>.

MILITANT ATTACKS IN EGYPT GROW MORE AMBITIOUS AS TARGETING PATTERNS CHANGE

James Brandon

A series of both large and small-scale attacks in Europe during the last fortnight have underlined the continuing activity of a range of jihadist groups in the country. The most dramatic attacks occurred in Sinai on January 29 when four coordinated attacks involving car bombs and mortar fire killed 32 Egyptian soldiers and policemen, mostly in al-Arish, the provincial capital of North Sinai. The attacks, among the most deadly in several years, were later claimed by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Supporters of Jerusalem) (*al-Ahram*, January 30). The assault prompted the Egyptian President Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi to cut short his visit to Ethiopia and return home, where he created a unified military command for the Sinai region to better tackle Islamist violence there (Ma'an News Agency, January 30). The attacks approximately coincided with the January 25 anniversary of the 2011 uprising against former president Hosni Mubarak (*al-Ahram*, January 30). Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis has operated under the name of "Wilayat Sinai" since the group's leaders pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in November; *wilayat* (province) indicates the group sees itself as a regional wing of the Islamic State, although evidence of practical links between the group remain scant. The attacks, however, suggest the group remains bold and ambitious and that it is determined to challenge the Egyptian security forces directly.

While the Sinai is home to the country's bloodiest Islamist insurgency, further small-scale attacks have continued elsewhere in recent weeks, most notably in the capital Cairo. On January 23 and 25, two bombs exploded in the Alf Maskan area of eastern Cairo, targeting the police on both occasions and injuring several people (*al-Ahram*, January 23; January 25). Ajnad Misr, another Egyptian jihadist organization, later claimed responsibility for the attacks against what it described as "criminal agencies" (Daily News Egypt, January 26). Shortly afterwards, on January 26, a homemade bomb was discovered and defused in City Stars, one of Cairo's

largest malls and located in the upscale Maadi area (*al-Ahram*, January 26). On February 3, two further small bombs were discovered at Cairo's international airport and defused by the security forces (*al-Ahram*, February 3). On February 5, one person was killed in Menoufia, a town north of Cairo, in a KFC restaurant when unknown attackers on a motorbike threw a Molotov cocktail and then opened fired (*al-Arabiya*, February 5). As these recent incidents in and around the capital indicate, as well as targeting the security forces, many recent attacks in Cairo have focused on civilian targets associated with Egypt's elite and also with Western influences. This contrasts with Sinai, where the vast majority of attacks have targeted the government and the security forces. It is too early to say, however, if this represents a substantive shift in targeting patterns.

Complicating analysis of recent events is that, while many attacks in and around Cairo are undoubtedly conducted by jihadist movements such as Afnan Misr, this is not always the case. For instance, on February 2, the branch of an Emirati bank in the Cairo suburb of Giza was attacked and set alight by masked attackers (*Daily News Egypt*, February 4). The attack was later claimed by a group called the "Popular Resistance of Giza," which posted a video of the attack on its Facebook page. The video, called "Under the Ashes," accused the bank of "financing massacres of the Egyptian people." [1] Although this group's exact identity is unclear, the largely secular and "revolutionary" language on its Facebook page and its focus on corporate targets suggests it may be related to one of the far-left or anarchist groups that have played a variety of roles in the Egyptian revolution, both in the toppling of Mubarak and in demonstrations against the subsequent Muslim Brotherhood government. [2] This indicates that violent opposition to the Egyptian government is not necessarily confined to Islamist groups. With the exception of Sinai, where the scale of militancy has to some extent undermined the government's control of parts of the region, the recent attacks in and around Cairo are only a minor irritant to the government and pose no serious threat to its control. That said, over the longer term, this constant stream of almost daily low-level attacks threatens to undermine al-Sisi's self-chosen image as a force for law, order and stability, one of the key pillars of his de facto legitimacy, particularly if the attacks, which are currently distinctly low-tech, become more sophisticated and lethal in the coming months.

Notes

1. The video can be seen here: <https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=1540989212819767&set=vb.1524711591114196&type=2&theater>.
2. <https://www.facebook.com/BelowAshes>.

Spreading Tentacles: The Islamic State in Bangladesh

Animesh Roul

Growing evidence suggests that the influence of the Islamic State organization has reached the South Asian, Muslim-majority country of Bangladesh. The country has long been home to small, but significant, numbers of radicals from both local militant groups, such as the Jama'at ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), the country's most significant local jihadist group, and those linked to transnational jihadist formations, such as al-Qaeda. However, the Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliphate and the promise of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to return to all Muslims their "dignity, might, rights and leadership" seem to have infused a renewed Islamist fervor within a section of Bangladeshi youths and among existing radical elements. [1]

Arrests Expose Militant Links

One of the clearest indications of this development came in late September 2014 when the government's arrest of a British citizen of Bangladeshi origin, Samiun Rahman (a.k.a. Ibn Hamdan), who lived in the capital Dhaka's Kamalapur area, unearthed an apparent Islamic State recruitment drive in the country (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], September 30, 2014). Investigations subsequently revealed that Samiun, a former London taxi controller who had spent time in British prisons, had travelled to Morocco, Mauritania and Syria, before entering Bangladesh in early 2014 to recruit jihadists from Bangladesh and neighboring Myanmar (*Daily Telegraph*, September 29, 2014). Intriguingly, Samiun reportedly confessed to recruiting Bangladeshis on behalf of both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, competing transnational jihadist groups. Two of his contacts – Asif Adnan and Fazle Elahi Tanzil – were also detained, although they were subsequently released on bail (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], December 24, 2014; December 30, 2014). Both are reportedly members of the newly-founded Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), an al-Qaeda linked militant group, although it is not clear which Syria-based jihadist group they were linked to, if any (*Bdnews24*, September 25, 2014).

Further evidence of the Islamic State's growing links and ambitions in Bangladesh came on January 19, when police detained Sakhawatul Kabir, a veteran militant leader who had long been associated with al-Qaeda members in Pakistan and with the JNB, along with three other individuals (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], January 19). According to Shaykh Nazmul Alam, a deputy police commissioner with Dhaka's detective

and criminal intelligence division, the arrested individuals intended to recruit other individuals to the Islamic State and were also allegedly planning major terrorist strikes in the country at the behest of the Islamic State (Risingbd.com, January 19). Kabir, who had a background in information technology, was subsequently identified as the regional commander of the Islamic State's operations in Bangladesh, while his associate Anwar Hossain has been identified as the group's local financier (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], January 19).

Other police operations have led to arrests linked to the Islamic State's online and social media operations. For instance, in late September 2014, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police arrested Hifzur Rahman, a student member of the JMB (*New Age* [Dhaka], September 26, 2014). Hifzur, however, additionally claimed to be the Islamic State's Dhaka unit leader and was reported to have been involved in spreading propaganda and carrying out promotional activities for the group using a Facebook page titled "ISIS Bangladesh" (*Dhaka Tribune*, September 27, 2014). Reports suggest that he was attempting to recruit foot soldiers for the Islamic State across the country, especially in the Sylhet and Habiaganj areas, which are located in the northeastern part of the country (*New Age* [Dhaka], September 26, 2014). Additional developments in the social media sphere included the release of an August 2014 video showing various individuals pledging their support to the Islamic State and al-Baghdadi in Bengali and Arabic, further underlining apparent Islamic State influence among some Bangladeshis (*Dhaka Tribune*, August 2, 2014). [2] There have also been reports in some Bengali-language Indian newspapers that 360 Islamic State-linked militants have entered Bangladesh, however this cannot be corroborated and seems unlikely (*Anandabazar Patrika* [Kolkata, India], January 21). There are no reliable figures publicly available on how many Bangladeshis are active with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

British Links

Bangladesh has a particular vulnerability to Islamic State radicalization because of large overseas Bangladeshi population and particularly the Bangladeshi diaspora in the United Kingdom, where some Muslim communities have proven significantly receptive to the lure of the Islamic State and other extremist groups, as illustrated by the above arrest of British citizen Samiun Rahman. For instance, a purported June 2014 Islamic State recruitment video titled "No Life without Jihad" announced that several British nationals of Bangladeshi origin had joined the Islamic State. [3] The video featured Abd al-Raqib Amin (a.k.a. "Abu Bara al-Hindi"), a British citizen born in Bangladesh, but raised in Aberdeen, Scotland. The video was released by the Islamic

State affiliated al-Hayat Media Center and urged Muslims in Western countries to join the ongoing jihad in Syria and Iraq (BBC News, June 23, 2014). Amin was seen in the video urging young Muslims to join the group stating, that "Living in the West... you feel depressed," and adding that "the cure for the depression is jihad" (al-Arabiya, June 29, 2014). In addition, in October 2013, at least five young men of Bangladeshi origin, acting as part of a group known as "Britani Brigade Bangladeshi Bad Boys," left the UK city of Portsmouth to join the Islamic State in Syria (*New Statesman*, November 6, 2013). A year later, four of them were reported to have been killed while fighting against Syrian government forces (*Guardian*, October 26, 2014). Such radicalized British-Bangladeshis have the potential to amplify the Islamic State threat in Bangladesh, due to their ability to travel abroad with greater ease than many Bangladeshis, to potentially access greater sources of funding and to connect with extremists based elsewhere, including in Europe and the United States.

Outlook

The involvement of transnational jihadist groups with Bangladesh is not new. Groups like al-Qaeda have enjoyed support among radical and militant communities in Bangladesh since at least the late 1990s when JMB leaders officially endorsed Osama bin Laden's *fatwa* against the United States. However, such militant groups have previously gained very limited traction in Bangladesh and have carried out very few successful attacks for a number of reasons, including the country's entrenched secular traditions, its effective security service, a widespread popular suspicion of imported forms of Islamism (particularly those connected to Pakistan) and generally limited levels of public support for even "democratic" or "moderate" Islamist groups like Jamaat-e-Islami. That said, the growing influence of the Islamic State in Bangladesh potentially signals more trouble ahead, particularly given that the country is yet to formally proscribe the group, which would help its security agencies to control the fundraising and recruitment activities of the organization. The apparent rise in Islamic State-related activism also comes as both Bangladesh's leaders and its security services are partly distracted by the country's ongoing political crisis, which has led to significant unrest in recent months. Even though there are no clear estimates of how many Bangladeshis might have travelled to Syria or Iraq to partake in the ongoing conflicts there, or the exact number of Islamic State sympathizers already inside country, the recent arrests and developments on social media suggest that there is clear potential for this trend to grow in due course.

Animesh Roul is the Executive Director of Research at the New Delhi-based Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict (SSPC).

Notes

1. Quotation taken from the following translation: Full Text of “A Message to the Mujahideen and the Muslim Ummah: In the Month of Ramadan,” Gatestone Foundation, July 1, 2014, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/documents/baghdadi-caliph.pdf>.
2. The video was uploaded to YouTube on August 2, 2014, with the English-language title, “Muslims in Bangladesh Give Bayah to the Caliphah Ibrahim (Hafiahulla).” The video has since been removed.
3. The video was released on YouTube in June 2014 and has since been removed.

Sweden Grapples with Rising Extremism

John C.K. Daly

Placid constitutional monarchy Sweden used to be perceived as largely immune from Islamist terrorism; even Osama bin Laden, in a videotaped speech in November 2004, said: “Before I begin, I say to you that security is an indispensable pillar of human life and that free men do not forfeit their security, contrary to Bush’s claim that we hate freedom. If so, then let him explain to us why we don’t strike, for example, Sweden?” (al-Jazeera, November 1, 2004). Just over a decade later, Sweden is being forced to grapple with the issue of radicalization in its Muslim communities, with the rise of the Islamic State threatening to catalyze existing trends of alienation, criminal and anti-Semitic violence and social polarization. A 2009 U.S. government report stated that there were 450,000-500,000 Muslims in Sweden, composing around five percent of the total population. [1] Large-scale Muslim immigration to Sweden began in the late 1960s, with immigration primarily from Turkey and the Balkans, later supplemented by arrivals from North Africa and the Middle East.

Growing Radicalization

Although the problem of Islamist radicalization came to Sweden later than to other European countries such as the UK and France, this trend was evident by the early 2010s. One of the most visible signs of this development came in November 2010, when Sweden raised its national terrorism threat level to medium for the first time ever; it has remained elevated ever since. [2] The very next month, on December 11, a car bomb exploded in central Stockholm, following which the bomber detonated his own suicide vest on a street, killing himself (The Local [Stockholm], December 11, 2010). The bomber, a Swedish citizen of Iraqi origin, had emailed a news organization before the attacks to say that his attack was in retaliation for the presence of Swedish soldiers in Afghanistan and for controversial cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad drawn by a Swedish artist (Tidningarnas Telegrambyra, December 11, 2010). Although the bomber was believed to have been at least partly radicalized in the UK and was potentially trained by militants in Iraq, the incident drew attention to the growing threat posed by radicalized Swedish nationals (Sverige Radio, October 22, 2014).

Although no equally significant Islamist attacks have occurred in Sweden since then, Swedish government assessments have continued to note the ongoing threat. For

instance, in its 2013 annual report, the Swedish intelligence service Säkerhetspolisen (Säpo) noted:

Terrorist-related activities in Sweden are primarily carried out by those who are motivated by Islamist extremism and such activities most often serve to support terrorist offenses in conflict zones such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen and Syria. Several people are also known to have travelled from Sweden to conflict zones to engage in terrorist training or other unlawful acts of violence... The terrorist threat to Swedish interests stems mainly from violence-promoting Islamism or al-Qaeda-inspired groups. [3]

More recently, in November 2014, Säpo's director general, Anders Thornberg, estimated that around 200-300 Swedish citizens had travelled to Syria to join al-Qaeda-inspired groups, with around 20 of these being killed and others returning to Sweden (Sveriges Radio, November 22, 2014). Referring to the Iraq and Syria-bound Swedish jihadists, Thornberg commented: "A certain number of young Swedish men are leaving and training in camps, learning to become terrorists to use explosives and weapons. They're going beyond the bounds of human behavior. They're fighting and killing other people." Since then, Säpo seems to have grown increasingly concerned about terrorist groups' recruitment of Swedish citizens, with spokesman Fredrik Milder saying in January 2015: "This is a national and international problem"(Sveriges Radio, January 23). Similarly, the chief police inspector of the capital Helsinki, Jari Taponen, said in January that of those who have travelled from Sweden to the Islamic State, 76 percent were Finnish passport holders and "almost 20" of whom were ethnic Finns (Yle TV1, January 22).

Evidence also suggests that Sweden may also see violence related to the ongoing tensions between Muslim radicals and wider society over issues relating to free speech and blasphemy. In particular, long predating France's *Charlie Hebdo* controversy, Sweden had its own cartoon controversy in 2007, which has not yet entirely died down. The controversy followed the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons incident in Denmark in early 2006 and began on June 11, 2007, when Swedish artist Lars Vilks, after being invited to participate in an art exhibition on "The Dog in Art," submitted three pen and ink drawings depicting Muhammad as a dog; Vilks had already drawn Muhammad in another exhibition in Vestfossen, Norway, leading to a number of reported threats against him (*Dagens Nyheter*, May 17, 2010). In 2011, police in Gothenburg arrested three men on suspicion of planning to murder Vilks (Goteborg Daily, September 21, 2011). Tensions over the issue re-emerged following the

Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris in early 2015. For instance, on January 7, a Swedish TV broadcaster accessed a secret Facebook group of Swedish jihadists and their supporters and found messages praising the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*'s offices in Paris. One user also posted, "Now these disgusting pigs will think twice before they mock Allah and His prophet," while another called for Allah to "multiply such attacks" (Sveriges Television AB, January 7).

Unrest

In addition to Islamist radicalization, Sweden has also faced broader problems with integrating Muslim immigrants. This was illustrated in May 2013 when several Stockholm suburbs with large Muslim immigrant populations, including Husby, Rinkeby and Kista, were plagued by riots lasting two weeks and were only ended after a massive police effort and a huge civil society mobilization (Sveriges Radio, May 28, 2013). The riots left 30 police officers injured and caused an estimated 60 million krona of damage (\$6 million) (Sveriges Radio, July 29, 2013).

The challenges facing Sweden in integrating its large Muslim population are perhaps best illustrated in Malmö, Sweden's third largest city, where 41 percent of the population have a foreign background (30 percent were born abroad and 11 percent are Swedish-born with foreign-born parents). [4] The city is marked by high levels of criminal and anti-Semitic violence, both of which often involve Muslims from the city's low-income districts. In 2014, Malmö suffered 36 small-scale bombings, with targets including police stations, courts, a prosecutor's office, a detention center and shops (10News.dk, December 28, 2014). Amid rising Muslim-Jewish tension in the city, Malmö police also recorded 60 hate crimes against Jews in 2012, up from an average of 22 in 2010 and 2011 (*Jerusalem Post*, August 1, 2013). Although most of these bombing incidents appear to be related to criminal and gang-related issues, rather than terrorism or ideologically-driven extremism, many also involved Muslim immigrants and therefore indicate the potential for Islamist extremists to access firearms and explosives.

Government Response

In response to the above developments, and particularly to the involvement of Swedish citizens in the Islamic State group, the government is now considering revamping its national counter-terrorism strategy, which was last updated in 2012. According to Interior Minister Anders Ygeman, this is motivated by both the growing number of people fighting abroad and from assessments that these individuals may pose a threat to Sweden. Ygeman said: "We have those who

travel and fight abroad and then come back, who can pose a terrorist threat” (Sveriges Radio, January 23). In addition, on January 11, Thornberg told the country’s annual security policy meeting in Salen that Säpo had managed to prevent a terrorist attack on Sweden through online surveillance conducted with the assistance of the National Defense Radio Establishment. He also commented on the country’s slowness to move into online monitoring: “It was terrible when we were the only Western democracy where the security police could not conduct online surveillance” (*Helsingin Sanomat* [Helsinki], January 13).

Outlook

The scale of Muslim immigration into Sweden has long caused tensions between the Swedish population and the newcomers. More than two decades ago, on August 14, 1993, Sweden’s Muslim community suffered its first arson attack when the Trollhättan mosque was burned to the ground (Polimasaren, August 19, 2014). Since then, strains between the two communities have slowly risen, no doubt partly prompted by growing radicalization among some elements of Sweden’s Muslim communities. In particular, there is a trend of mosques being attacked. Over an eight-day period in December-January 2015, several mosques in cities across Sweden – Eslöv, Eskilstuna and Uppsala – were torched in arson attacks (*Svenska Dagbladet* [Stockholm], January 4). On January 9, Gothenburg’s main mosque was evacuated after a bomb threat, exacerbating Swedish Muslims’ fear of reprisals following the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in Paris (*Expressen* [Stockholm], January 9).

These incidents, alongside the above evidence of growing Islamist radicalization, highlight the potential for further attempted terrorist attacks in Sweden and for broader unrest between Sweden’s different communities. In particular, there is the clear potential for a cycle of violence to develop, fuelled by relatively easy access to firearms and explosives in cities such as Malmö, attacks on mosques, Islamist anger at perceived slights to their religion by artists such as Vilks, all fuelled further by the growing involvement of a significant number of Swedes in the Islamic State organization.

Dr. John C. K. Daly is a Eurasian foreign affairs and defense policy expert for The Jamestown Foundation and a non-resident fellow at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute in Washington, DC.

Notes

1. “2009 Report on International Religious Freedom,” U.S. Department of State, October 26, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2009/>.

2. “2013 Crime and Safety Report,” Government of Sweden.

3. “Säkerhetspolisens årsbok 2013” (Security Service Yearbook), Säkerhetspolisen, pp. 29-31.

4. “Malmö stad - Malmöbor med utländsk bakgrund,” Malmö city (City of Malmö - Malmö residents of foreign origin), <http://malmo.se/Kommun--politik/Statistik/Befolkning/Utlandsk-bakgrund.html>.

Mindful of the Islamic State, Boko Haram Broadens Reach into Lake Chad Region

Jacob Zenn

In early January 2015, many foreign and domestic observers of Nigeria focused on whether Boko Haram would ramp up its attacks to disrupt the February 14, 2015 Nigerian presidential elections, between incumbent Goodluck Jonathan (often characterized as the “southern Christian” candidate) and Muhammad Buhari (the “northern Muslim” candidate). This was not unwarranted. It was during the run-up to elections in 2011 – in which Jonathan defeated Buhari in a landslide – that Boko Haram launched its first attacks on political and religious figures, leading to an insurgency that has now claimed more than 15,000 lives.

However, rather than focusing the presidential elections, Boko Haram and a new faction that calls itself the “Islamic State in West Africa” are consolidating control of their self-declared caliphate in northeastern Nigeria and neighboring parts of Cameroon, Niger and Chad. This article reviews Boko Haram’s recent operations in the Lake Chad regions of Cameroon, Niger and Chad in the context of increasing Islamic State influence on Boko Haram in Borno State, Nigeria.

Evolution in the Lake Chad Region

Cameroon

Boko Haram effectively began operations in Cameroon in 2012, when its “missionary preachers” recruited young men from northern Cameroonian towns (ipsnews.net [Yaounde], February 7, 2012). In 2013, Boko Haram began militant operations in Cameroon. First, in coordination with reintegrated remnants of Ansaru, Boko Haram began to kidnap foreigners in northern Cameroon, including 10 Chinese engineers, seven French tourists, and four Western Christian missionaries, and released them in exchange for several millions of dollars and dozens of militants and arms dealers from Cameroonian prison (Iroko Magazine, July 28, 2014; Camer.be, June 2, 2014; *Le Journal International*, February 7, 2014). [1] Secondly, Boko Haram retreated to mountainous towns along the Cameroonian border with Nigeria to evade the Nigerian Army’s offensive that was launched against Boko Haram in May 2013.

It was not until May 2014, however, that Cameroonian President Paul Biya (and his Chadian counterpart President

Idriss Déby) declared war on Boko Haram during a summit in Paris (France24.com, May 24, 2014). By this time, however, Boko Haram bases and supply lines were already deeply entrenched in northern Cameroon. In late 2014, for example, Cameroon evacuated citizens from neighborhoods in the border town of Fotokol after repeated Boko Haram incursions, in which militants forced local citizens to burn their national ID cards (Cameroonweb.com, November 4, 2014).

However, Boko Haram’s full-scale “invasion” of Cameroon did not begin until late December 2014, when the militants launched three major attacks:

- On December 29, 1,000 militants raided five Cameroonian border towns in what was possibly Boko Haram’s largest-ever attack (Reuters, December 29, 2014);
- On January 12, several hundred militants attacked a Cameroonian border garrison in Kolofata (Cameroon Tribune, January 13);
- On January 19, Boko Haram kidnapped 80 hostages near Mokolo, who were subsequently used as human shields; several dozen escaped soon after or were rescued (Cameroononline.org, January 19).

In addition, on January 5, Boko Haram leader Abubakr Shekau delivered his most explicit threat to Cameroon in a video called “Message to President Biya of Cameroon.” Shekau warned that Cameroon will “taste what has befallen Nigeria.” This represented Boko Haram’s view of Cameroon not just as a strategic target but as an ideological enemy (*Vanguard* [Lagos], January 7).

Chad

As a result of Boko Haram’s attacks in Cameroon, as well as Boko Haram’s January 4 capture of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNTJF) base in Baga, Nigeria at the intersection of the border with Cameroon, Chad and Niger, President Déby ordered troops to Cameroon’s Far North Region on January 16. These troops, who had experienced fighting Boko Haram-allied jihadists in northern Mali in 2013, offered tactical mobility and reinforcements to the worn out and numerically thin Cameroonian Army and gendarmarie, while Cameroon waited for further military support from international partners (Voice of America, January 23). The Chadian troops were also welcome in Cameroon due to the two countries’ Francophone backgrounds and mutual economic interests.

Nonetheless, despite initial successes in wresting several border towns from Boko Haram not only in Cameroon but also Nigeria in early February, Chadian intervention in Cameroon risks inviting a response from Boko Haram, which operates in several Chadian Arabic-speaking towns in Cameroon's Logone-et-Chari, bordering Chad's Lac State (Icameroon.com, March 28, 2014). This sparse borderland is also a route for mafias, which often operate with tacit consent from corrupt local officials, smuggling weapons from Libyan stockpiles to Boko Haram into Cameroon for use by the insurgency there (Africa Presse, August 20, 2014). In addition, although Boko Haram is yet to attack Chad, there are also reports of Chadians joining the ranks of Boko Haram, who could facilitate such a Boko Haram invasion of the country (although some Nigerians suspect behind-the-scenes "truces" between Boko Haram and the Chadian authorities will inhibit this).

Examples of Chad nationals being involved in Boko Haram include:

- Chadians run Shari'a courts in towns under Boko Haram's control in the Caliphate that Shekau declared in Nigeria in July 2014 (*Leadership* [Abuja], December 15, 2014). These Chadians may also have played a role in Boko Haram's decision to rename the two Boko Haram-occupied towns of Gwoza and Mubi as Dar al-Hikma and Madinat al-Islam ("Abode of Wisdom" and "City of Islam" in Arabic) after negotiations between the Nigerian government and Boko Haram for the release of the 250 kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls, which were mediated by Chad, collapsed in November 2014 (This Day Live, November 7);
- A Chadian faction of Boko Haram issued a video on October 30, 2014, in the Boudouma, Hausa and Kanuri languages, in which 10 militants decapitated three anti-Boko Haram Civilian Joint Task Force (JTF) vigilantes and threatened Chad, Cameroon and Niger as well as Presidents Jonathan, Hollande and Obama. They said they had captured the men in Malam Fatori town on the Niger border of the "Islamic State" (DefenceWeb. Co.Za, November 4, 2014). Notably, Malam Fatori was the first town Chad took back from Boko Haram when it intervened in Nigerian territory on January 30, 2015 (BBC, January 31);
- The Federal Government reported 15 Chadians were among 42 Boko Haram insurgents killed in Biu according to documents found on their bodies, when government forces repelled a Boko Haram attack there on January 14 (*Punch* [Lagos], January 16);

- Reports have surfaced about the emergence of "light-skinned foreigners," which may mean Chadians (or Tuaregs), in Boko Haram camps in northern Nigeria, including the trainers of some of the 19 teenage female suicide bombers (The Sun, December 25, 2014);
- Some Boko Haram militants have worn Chadian Army uniforms (possibly stolen or reused), while other militants – particularly those formerly affiliated with Ansaru – may have retreated to Sudan or Libya after the French intervention in northern Mali in 2013. They might have returned to Nigeria as militants in Boko Haram-related factions, such as Harakat al-Muhajiroon, which specializes in kidnappings in Cameroon and raiding military barracks in Nigeria (al-Rakoba.Net [Khartoum], January 25);
- Internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing Boko Haram raids in Nigeria have reported hearing attacking militants speaking languages such as Hausa, Kanuri, French, Fulani and Arabic, which suggests growing regionalization among the insurgent ranks (al-Jazeera, January 25).

Boko Haram's logistics networks in Chad, mistrust of the Chadian government (as evidenced in the failed Chibok negotiations) and use of the country as a pool for recruitment means that Chad will remain a potential theater for Boko Haram attacks. Shekau's threats to President Déby for promising to support Cameroon after the attack in on the MNTJF base in Baga, which provoked Déby to intervene in Nigeria to combat Boko Haram, could further accelerate any Boko Haram decision to attack Chad.

Niger

Boko Haram has never carried out any major attacks in Niger; Ansaru, however, claimed attacks on French energy plants in Arlit and Agadez in May 2013 in conjunction with the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) and Mokhtar Belmokhtar (France24.Com, May 24, 2013). However, after taking over Abadam in October 2014, Damasak in November 2014 and Baga in January 2015 in northern Borno, Boko Haram began manning parts of the Nigerian border with Niger only several meters from Nigérien troops in Diffa (*Leadership* [Abuja], November 25, 2014). Boko Haram also reportedly sent militants in disguise as IDPs to recruit from among their ethnic Kanuri kin in refugee camps in Diffa (RFI, January 23).

Boko Haram has also recently used ideological issues to boost its influence in Niger. For instance, Shekau threatened

Nigérien President Issoufou in a video on January 21 for expressing sympathy to France after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris, five days after a YouTube user called “Islamic State in Nigeria” posted a video of Shekau praising the “spilling of French blood” in the attack (*Vanguard* [Lagos], January 22). Ansaru, notably, also issued a video praising the *Charlie Hebdo* attack on January 29, though it also characteristically criticized Boko Haram’s killing of Muslim civilians in Nigeria (al-Hidayat Media, January 29). The anti-*Charlie Hebdo* protests in Zinder on January 19, in which more than 40 churches were burned and Boko Haram’s flag was reportedly flown, further suggests that Boko Haram (and Ansaru) may be able to recruit Nigériens beyond Diffa (Tele Sahel Television [Niamey], January 19).

Re-Branding and the Islamic State

The re-orientation of Shekau’s faction of Boko Haram from Nigerian targets, including elections, such as when Shekau first announced the “jihad” in 2010, to a more regional focus has coincided with his pledge of support to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Shekau’s declaration of a caliphate in northeastern Nigeria and Boko Haram’s use of Islamic State symbolism, such its *nasheed*-s (chants), flag and choreographed, videoed mass killings (Terrorism Monitor, December 19, 2014). However, Shekau’s faction will unlikely conclude a *bayat* (pledge) agreement with the Islamic State because of the Islamic State’s ambivalence over Shekau’s erratic persona and al-Baghdadi’s tendency to not accept *bayat* from militant groups that are not united. In addition, Shekau’s preference for Boko Haram’s autonomy from foreign jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda previously, and his desire for unrivaled leadership power, will inhibit such a *bayat*.

At the same time, however, another faction of Boko Haram is also reaching out to Islamic State through postings on the new Boko Haram Twitter account, al-Urhwa al-Wutqha (possibly named after a late 1800s Arabic-language Islamist newspaper in Paris, since the twitter-feed’s introduction also coincided with the *Charlie Hebdo* attack). [2] The videos from this account include an interview with spokesman “Abu Musa’b al-Barnawi” (likely a pseudonym intended to honor Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s predecessor Abu Musab al-Zarqawi). Al-Barnawi, like Ansaru in 2012-2013, distanced himself from the killing of Muslim civilians. [3] None of the Boko Haram videos posted by al-Urhwa al-Wutqha mention Shekau at all, but their professionalization and use of English and Arabic subtitles and the office setting and wearing of veils in the al-Barnawi interview resemble the first video of Ansaru’s *shura* in May 2012 (Desert Herald [Kaduna], May 5, 2012).

One conclusion that could be drawn from this Twitter feed is that it represents the Ansaru militants who re-integrated with Boko Haram in the Nigeria-Cameroon border region, where most al-Urhwa al-Wutqha-claimed attacks take place; Ansaru rejoined Boko Haram under Shekau out of despair after Nigerian security forces raided Ansaru cells in northwest Nigeria and the French-led military intervention cut Ansaru off from its al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) sponsors. However, the promotion of this Twitter account by key Islamic State supporters, such as Shaybah al-Hamad, and its references to Boko Haram’s caliphate as the “Islamic State in West Africa” and its issuing of a video called “Message from a Mujahid,” copied from an Islamic State video series of the same name, suggests that this faction no longer sees itself as part of the al-Qaeda fold. Rather, it seems to have switched its allegiance to Islamic State, although al-Hamad has established that there is no *bayat* “yet” between this faction and Islamic State. [4]

Also relevant to this jihadist equation in Nigeria is the Ansaru video that praised the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. In the video, Ansaru, which was previously almost completely dormant since 2013, also claimed an attack on the Jos-Bauchi highway, where former Ansaru militant Hussaini was arrested in 2014 (*Premium Times* [Abuja], June 21, 2014; *Punch* [Lagos], January 19). This suggests that Ansaru has maintained a theater of operations outside of Boko Haram’s main bases in Borno State, even while some of its militants have re-integrated to form the faction of Boko Haram that is still critical of Shekau, but now is more allied with the Islamic State than with al-Qaeda or AQIM.

Conclusion

Boko Haram operations are predominantly focused on Borno State and, increasingly, neighboring parts of Cameroon, Chad and Niger. The geographic and cultural distance of this region from Abuja as well as the growing influence of the Islamic State on Boko Haram could lead to what had originally been a “Nigerian-based” insurgency developing less nationally-focused aims. If the operational space in the Lake Chad region proves more fertile for recruitment and expansion, then Boko Haram factions may increasingly seek to carry out attacks there and to hold territory deeper in the southern Sahel. While this development could decrease the threat to Abuja itself, it is still worth noting that both Ansaru and the “al-Urhwa al-Wutqha” faction of Boko Haram retain their militant networks and operational capabilities near Abuja in the Middle Belt region. This includes Gombe, where two female suicide attackers detonated explosives after President Jonathan’s rally there on February 2 (Elombah.com, February 3).

Therefore, it is possible that Boko Haram will target the Nigerian elections throughout the country, but Boko Haram's priorities, in terms of its rhetoric and operations, are in Borno, where there are already major hurdles to holding elections due to the militants' control over large tracts of land and the ongoing battles between Boko Haram and Nigerian, Chadian, Cameroonian and Nigérien troops.

Jacob Zenn is an analyst of African and Eurasian Affairs for The Jamestown Foundation.

Notes

1. See Jacob Zenn, "Ansaru: A Profile of Nigeria's Newest Jihadist Movement," *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume: 11 Issue: 1, January 10, 2013, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40287&no_cache=1.
2. @Alurwa_Alwuthqa posted on January 19, 2015. The account has since been suspended.
3. @Alurwa_Alwuthqa posted on January 27, 2015. The account has since been suspended.
4. Please see Shaybah al-Hamad's twitter feed, January 28, 2015.