

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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NIGERIA: ANOTHER SMALL VICTORY AGAINST BOKO HARAM

Alexander Sehmer

According to reports this month, Nigerian troops uncovered a Boko Haram bomb-making factory near the border town of Ngala, Borno State, Nigeria. Army spokesman Sani Kukasheka Usma, keen to promote the find as the latest success in Nigeria's campaign against the radical group, attributed the find to "efficient intelligence gathering" and the "resilience" of the Nigerian military (*Leadership*, May 2).

This discovery—albeit minor, as the troops appear only to have found gas cylinders, gunpowder, and some electrical wiring—is one of a string of recent successes, including the reported rescue of 1,000 hostages held by Boko Haram and the apprehension of four alleged female suicide bombers in an operation in the Sambisa Forest (*Vanguard*, May 2).

On May 1, the military also arrested two alleged Boko Haram commanders. Mohammed Sani Nafiu, one of the apprehended militants, is accused of killing General Mohammed Shuwa, a veteran of Nigeria's civil war who

was murdered in 2012 (*The Sun [Nigeria]*, May 3). Nafi denies any involvement and claims he has been framed by the military (*Vanguard*, May 3).

Even accounting for the Nigerian media's celebration over military victories against Boko Haram, Nigeria has kept up a successful counter-insurgency strategy against the group since the election of President Muhammadu Buhari in May of last year. But as Jamestown fellow Jacob Zenn explains in an article in this issue, the group may be down, but it is far from out, as evidenced by such major unresolved issues as the kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls.

Nigeria's military should maintain its campaign, but there is much that can be improved on a regional level to tackle a group that is now a regional problem. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), for example, a coalition of West African forces, remains poorly coordinated and is largely a political showpiece.

BANGLADESH: RECENT KILLINGS RAISE QUESTIONS OF AL-QAEDA PRESENCE

Alexander Sehmer

Extremists in Bangladesh killed two gay rights activists in April, the latest in a spate of attacks on liberals and secularists. Xulhaz Mannan, a 35-year-old editor of Roopbaan, the country's only gay magazine, alongside actor and activist Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy, were hacked to death in Mannan's apartment in the Kalabagan neighborhood of Dhaka by a group of five men claiming to be delivery workers ([The Daily Star](#) [Bangladesh], April 26). A police officer and security guard were also injured in the attack.

Within hours, Ansar al-Islam, which purports to be the Bangladeshi branch of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), claimed responsibility for the killings. Later, the group released a gruesome video that included images of the bodies being dragged around the apartment ([DNA India](#), April 30).

Some have characterized the attacks as an escalating competition between Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda for prominence in Bangladesh ([NDTV](#), May 5). Bangladeshi authorities, however, deny the presence of al-Qaeda and IS in the country. Instead, they insist the recent series of killings is the work of local hardliners. When Nazimuddin Samad, a 26-year-old law student, was killed just days ahead of the aforementioned Mannan and Tonoy murders, the authorities attributed it to Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), dismissing claims by Ansar al-Islam that its members were behind the killing ([Express Tribune](#), April 12).

Members of ABT, which has been outlawed since May 2015, have been arrested for similar kinds of killings in the past; last year, the group released a list of potential targets that included 14 secular writers ([Dhaka Tribune](#), November 3, 2015). A similar document—containing no names but focusing on those who “promote” socially liberal ideas—was left by Mannan's killers ([The Daily Star](#) [Bangladesh], April 28).

As the authorities point out, Mannan's murder, which received a good deal of attention in the Western media in part because he was employed by USAID, is characteristic of the other ABT killings in that they were crudely carried out by individuals armed with machetes and meat cleavers ([Terrorism Monitor](#), August 7, 2015).

The growing level of intolerance is a worrying development. Even if al-Qaeda and IS have no permanent presence in Bangladesh, recent events suggest their emissaries would have little trouble operating there.

Radical Change: The Impact of Islamic State on Tunisia

Ryan Pereira

Since the March 2015 release of Islamic State's (IS) “Tunisia for us and not for the apostates” video, there has been a significant increase in the level of jihadist violence in Tunisia. Much of this has been driven by IS, which coordinates its grimly characteristic high profile, mass-casualty attacks from neighboring Libya. This was made explicit in the 2015 video, which showed a masked militant named Abu Yahya al-Tounessi calling on his brothers to join him in Libya and prepare for a wider campaign.

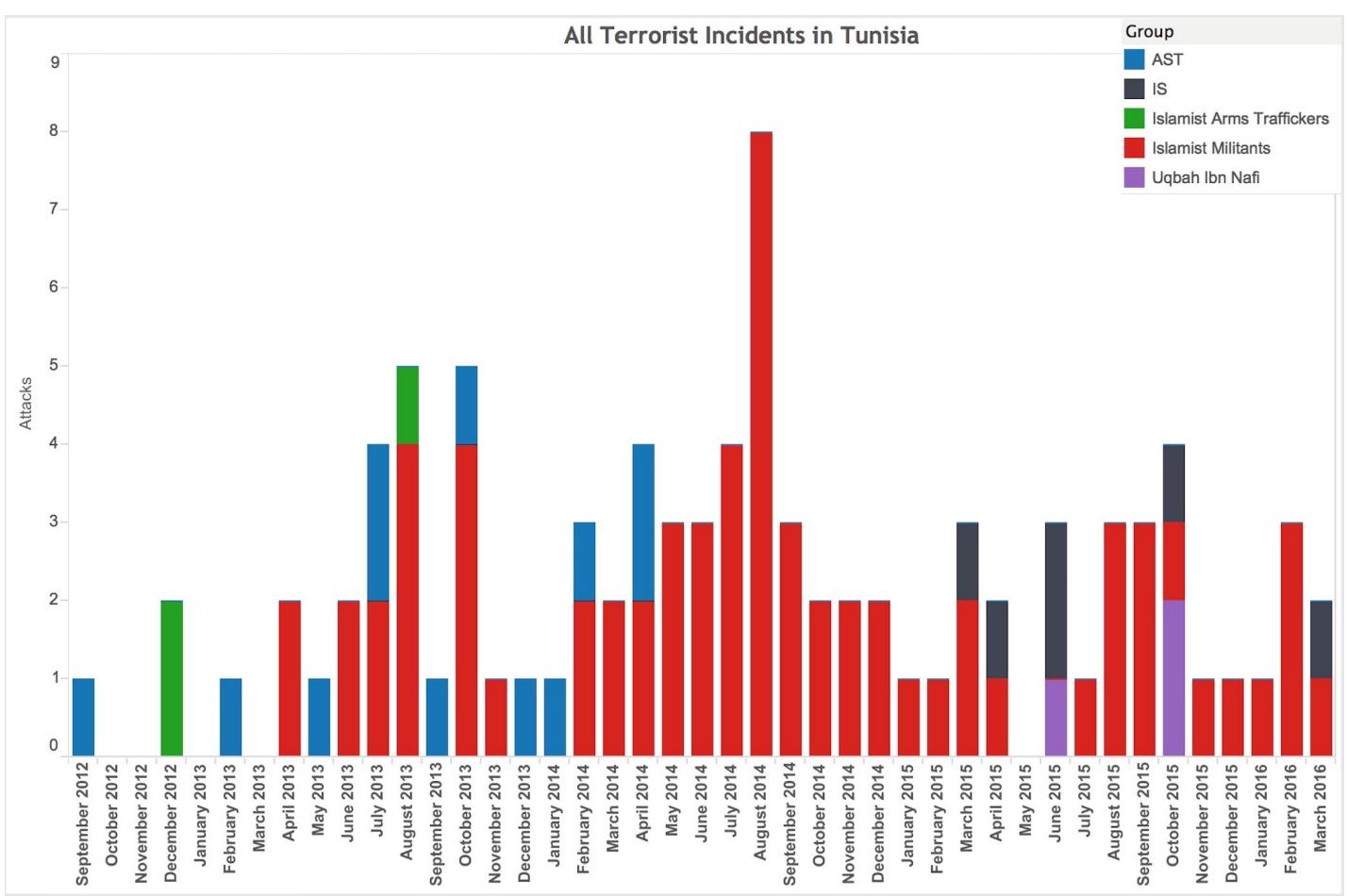
“We are coming back to conquer Tunisia,” al-Tounessi warned. “I swear you will not be at ease now with the Islamic State a few kilometers from you just across the border.” [1]

Before Islamic State

Between September 2012 and October 2014, the al-Qaeda-linked Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST) was by far the most visible jihadist organization in Tunisia. It built a popular support base following the overthrow of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011, and a flourishing black market weapons trade enabled the jihadists to prepare for a slow burning but escalating confrontation with the state ([CTC Sentinel](#), October 22, 2015).

Similarly, Katibat Uqba Ibn Nafi (KUIN), labeled by the Tunisian government as a cut-out for al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a label the group only acknowledged in 2015, has carried out a low-level insurgency from its bases in Tunisia's impoverished and neglected Jebel Chaambi area along the western border with Algeria since late 2012.

Over that period, however, jihadist violence remained at a relatively low level. AST's attacks were skewed heavily towards military targets, and over its entire lifespan (a



government crackdown on the group effectively put an end to it by late 2014), AST killed fewer than 10 civilians and 30 members of the Tunisian security forces.

KUIN was responsible for the country's deadliest terrorist attack when militants in Jebel Chaambi ambushed two military checkpoints on July 16, 2014, killing 15 and wounding 25 soldiers. Nevertheless, KUIN's operation in Henchir el-Talla remains something of an aberration, as its second deadliest attack killed only four soldiers.

Although the number of terrorist incidents in Tunisia over the years has remained fairly constant (see Figure 1 "All Terrorist Incidents in Tunisia"), the level of jihadist violence in Tunisia has escalated significantly since the emergence of IS last year. From September 2012 until the Bardo National Museum attack in March 2015—the first IS attack in Tunisia—jihadists killed fewer than 85 individuals, the overwhelming majority members of them members of the Tunisian security forces.

For comparison, during that same time period, jihadists in neighboring Algeria and Libya killed more than 140 and 875 people, respectively ([START Global Terrorism Database](#), April 3). An IS statement described the attack on the Bardo National Museum as "the first drop of the rain," and three months later the group made good on

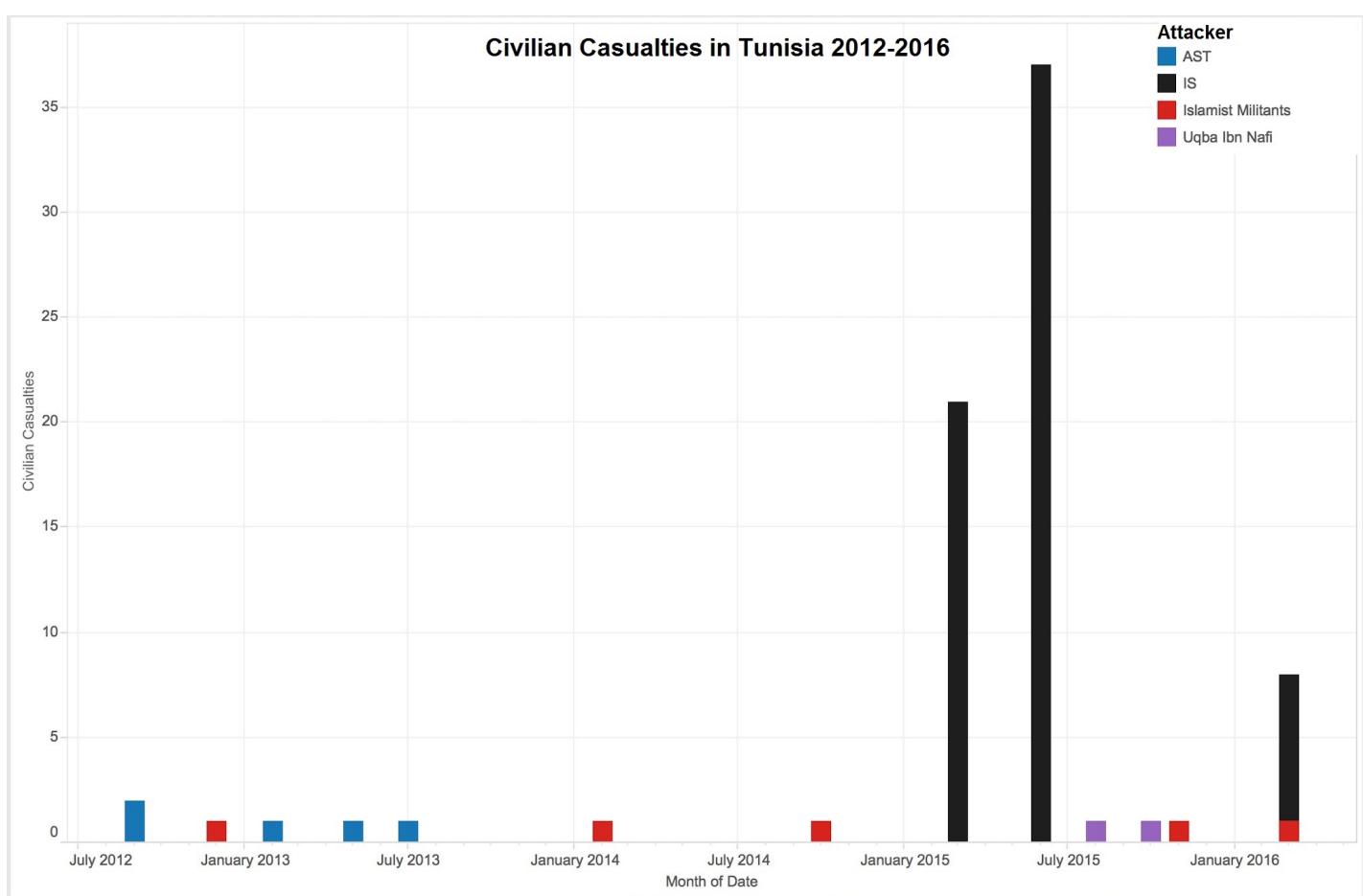
this by killing 37 civilians in Sousse ([Jihadology.net](#), March 19, 2015).

Enter Islamic State

Following IS' split from al-Qaeda in February 2014, AST and KUIN's leadership remained loyal to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Their foot soldiers, however, gravitated towards IS. This phenomenon, where an al-Qaeda affiliate's leadership remains loyal to al-Zawahiri while younger fighters defect to IS, has largely held up across al-Qaeda's network and helps to explain why IS has been able to establish a foothold in areas where al-Qaeda-linked groups initially dominated the jihadist landscape.

IS has had considerable success in attracting Tunisians to fight in Syria and Iraq. An estimated 7,000 Tunisian jihadis have fought under the IS banner in Syria and Iraq, and at least 625 of them are estimated to have returned home ([Soufan Group](#), December 2015).

Since then, the data shows, IS attacks have accounted for most of the attacks and the majority of the casualties (see Figure 1 and Figure 2 "Civilian Casualties in Tunisia 2012-2016"). Even in cases where it was unclear who was behind the attacks – coded under the catchall "Is-



lamist militants” in the data – it is probable that IS inspired them.

AST and KUIN have collectively killed fewer civilians in total than IS did in its first attack. While KUIN’s attacks have mostly been against security forces within Kasserine, IS has projected strength across a much larger geographic area, conducting lethal attacks in Sousse, Kasserine, Medenine, Tunis, and Sidi Bouzid governors.

Strategic Shift

A few other trends become clear when looking at the attack data. Many of IS’ early attacks targeted the Tunisian tourism industry, a key driver of the country’s economy. The attacks against the Bardo National Museum and British holidaymakers at the Sousse resort were intended to scare away tourists, weaken the economy, and swell the jihadists’ ranks with unemployed, disillusioned youth.

In November 2015, IS claimed responsibility for a suicide operation against a bus carrying members of the presidential guard. Also, the Tunisian government has accused the group of carrying out the March 2016 Ben

Guardane attack, which targeted police, military, and national-guard posts.

IS has killed a larger number of soldiers since its emergence than either AST or KUIN, although KUIN’s July 2014 attack remains the single deadliest incident for Tunisia’s military.

IS attacks against symbolic targets and security forces likely serve several purposes. They demonstrate the security forces’ inability to prevent terrorism and provoke the government to adopt a heavy-handed response. As the authorities move to crack down on jihadist networks, arbitrary arrests, torture, and intrusive security measures discourage locals from cooperating with security forces and push more young towards IS.

But the shift also shows how effective IS’ earlier strikes were – the group’s attacks on Sousse beach and the Bardo museum delivered a fatal blow to Tunisia’s image as a tourist destination. Tourism revenue plummeted by a staggering 54 percent in the first two months of 2016, compared to the same period in 2015 ([Hurriyet Daily News](#), March 31). After the Ben Guerdane attacks, the U.S. State Department issued a travel warning for southeastern Tunisia and the mountainous areas in the

country's west, urging travelers to "exercise caution in all parts of Tunisia" ([US Department of State](#), April 1).

An Islamic State Enclave in Tunisia?

The IS end goal in Tunisia is to overrun an area along the Libyan border in order to establish and govern a new province. On March 24, the security forces detained 15 IS fighters in the town of Sened; their confessions revealed that they had received weapons training in Libya and planned to establish an emirate in Gafsa in southwest Tunisia ([Mosaique.fm](#), March 30).

Over 1,000 Tunisian nationals are reported to be fighting under the IS banner in Libya. Meanwhile, training camps in Sabratha and other border cities appear to be the center of IS' operations against Tunisia ([Terrorism Monitor](#), April 1; [Washington Institute](#), July 6, 2015).

Authorities believe the Tunisian nationals involved in the Bardo Museum and Sousse beach attacks trained at the Sabratha facility. While it is still unclear how many of the Ben Guerdane attackers trained outside of Tunisia, the IS leadership in Libya most likely directed the attack. Several days earlier, the authorities warned that Moez Fezzani, a career jihadist who fought with IS in Syria and is now thought to be active in Libya, was working with Miftah Manita, one of the individuals whom Tunisian security forces killed in the recent Ben Guerdane assault ([Twitter](#), March 9).

A government spokesman claimed that most of the attackers were Tunisian nationals who had been living in Ben Guerdane and were part of a large sleeper cell network in the city. Given the dozens of militants involved and the sophisticated nature of the operation, it is not implausible that hundreds of local residents supported and supplied the terrorists.

And while the recent escalation has centered on Ben Guerdane, past terrorist attacks indicate that there are several other areas where the state may be vulnerable to large-scale jihadist operations, including Sidi Bouzi, Zarsis, and the mountains and pine forests around Kasserine. [2]

If IS is able to destabilize Tunisia, KUIN may take advantage of the opportunity to escalate its low-level insurgency in Kasserine. This could set in motion a danger-

ous escalation between IS and al-Qaeda, with each side attempting to gain control over the local jihadist scene.

How to Respond to Islamic State

Although the state has mobilized the security forces to confront the militants in Ben Guerdane, the government must also move quickly to rebuild trust between citizens and the state, strengthen democratic institutions, and uphold the principles of dignity and social justice enshrined in the Tunisian constitution. Unless the Tunisian government can regain the population's trust and address the root causes of jihadism, IS may soon tarnish the Arab Spring's sole success story.

Ryan Pereira is a 2016 Boren Fellow in the United Arab Emirates researching jihadism and Countering Violent Extremism.

Notes:

[1] This analysis uses data compiled by terrorism expert Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Valens Global to illustrate IS' emergence in Tunisia and the development of its strategy there.

[2] Data showing the geographic spread of attacks can be found on Tableau Public: <https://public.tableau.com/profile/ryan.pereira#/vizhome/ASTVisualizationsValens-GlobalMap/Sheet1>.

Iran and Its Cyber-Terrorism Strategies

Nima Adelkhah

U.S. government charges levied against seven Iranian hackers in March over cyber-attacks against 46 financial institutions and the infiltration of the computer control system of a New York dam has renewed concerns about Iran's engagement in cyber-terrorism against the United States ([Al Jazeera](#), March 25).

Those attacks date back to 2013, but there have been a range of cyber-attacks originating from Iran, of varying seriousness, targeting industrial facilities, bank websites and the personal websites of American, Israeli, and Arab officials ([Gulf News](#), May 14, 2013; [Al-Jazeera](#), December 18, 2009). In one of the most high-profile attacks, the so-called Iranian Cyber Army targeted Twitter in 2009, months after the microblogging site was used by anti-government activists to foment street protests following that year's disputed presidential election ([The Jerusalem Post](#), February 6, 2010).

Since 2009—and particularly in response to Stuxnet in 2011—Iran's cyber-campaigns have combined a mixture of defensive and offensive strategies, and have been conducted either directly or through proxies assigned specific tasks by state actors.

Iran's Cyber Campaigns

The primary actors are most likely a faction of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) tasked with carrying out cyber-attacks, as well as preventing reciprocal attacks against Iran's key institutions. They command a growing network that operates with the intent of disrupting U.S. communication and information systems, and may have been behind the alleged "takeover," as Iran claims it, of a U.S. RQ-170 unmanned drone in northeastern Iran in December 2011 ([Fars News](#), December 8; [Al Jazeera](#), December 4 2012).

Through private companies, many of which have ties to the IRGC, this cyber network also aims to curtail American-led cyber-attacks, to which ends it has had—if one is to believe the IRGC-affiliated Gerdab website—considerable success ([Gerdab](#), April 29 2012).

The second group is made up of "hacktivists" who operate as proxies with the support of the Iranian state. Their activities are limited in scope, but include defacing, trolling and other forms of anti-social internet conduct. Although the identity of most of these hackers is unknown, it is likely that many are contracted by the state through private companies such as Mersad Company ([Arab News](#), March 24, 2016). Similarly *basiji* volunteers are active online, often operating as employees of companies with ties to the IRGC.

Independent hacktivist groups also exist, among them Ashiyaneh, a pro-state group that by 2010 had claimed responsibility for the hacking of 1,000 American, British and French websites ([Raja News](#), August 30 2010; [DW Persian](#), September 17 2010).

The third group, the so-called Iranian Cyber Army, has been active since 2005, and has grown to be the most visible, with the launch of internet attacks not only on the United States and Israel, but also Islamic State, and other Sunni militant groups such as ([IRNA](#), July 6 2015).

The group described itself in January 2010 as a collective of volunteer hackers who "defend" Iran from its enemies ([The Jerusalem Post](#), February 6, 2010). However, it was later claimed by Ibrahim Jabari, an IRGC commander, that the Iranian Cyber Army was created by the IRGC and represents an internet military unit tasked with "defending" against cyber-attacks ([Farda News](#), 20 February 2011).

As well as external cyber-attacks, the Iranian Cyber Army is responsible for a campaign of proactive content production. This was an idea proposed by Reza Taqipour, who served as communications minister between 2009 and 2012, as the state-approved production of cultural and media content ([Gerdab](#), July 4 2011). It is an attempt to 'cancel out' the perceived soft threat of pervasive Western media through the state-led production of media intended for domestic consumption.

A variety of actors at various public or state institutions have been involved in this campaign. They range from students and *basijis* to state-sponsored reporters working for news outlets such as Fars or Mehr News, with the aim of promoting media content in favor of the state.

How Tehran Views Cyber-Terrorism

The notion of “cyber-terrorism” first appeared in Iranian security discourse in the mid-2000s, when the phenomenon was limited to hacking activities, e-bombs, spyware, and viruses. One early account describes this in terms of coordinated computer-centric attacks ([Aftab](#), November 18 2007), while another describes it in terms of legal, political, and military paradigms ([Fars News](#), January 27, 2005). But in the main, prior to 2009, security-related internet operations were, by and large, understood as criminal activities best dealt by law enforcement.

With the disputed 2009 elections, however, which saw members of the Green Movement and others use the internet and social media to coordinate street demonstrations, cyber-terrorism emerged as an important factor in Iran’s security discourse, particularly within the intelligence agencies.

In the fall of 2009, in the wake of the elections, a number of top Iranian officials—including Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—frequently used the term “soft war” to describe anti-government internet activism. It was presented as being orchestrated from abroad by the U.S., and was compared to the “velvet revolutions” of the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries ([Terrorism Monitor](#), June 12, 2010). Soft war, as the Supreme Leader defines it, is warfare “by means of cultural tools, for the purpose of influence, for the purpose of fabrication, for the purpose of spreading rumor; with the advanced technologies of modern times,” ultimately causing “doubt in the hearts and minds of people” ([Khamenei.ir](#) November 25 2009).

The “soft war” aspect of cyber-terrorism, then, has its roots in various psychological warfare operations and disinformation tactics—the production of harmful cultural content, coordinated through foreign-controlled networks and intended to influence the beliefs, emotions, and social behaviors of ordinary people.

The second, or “hard,” form of cyber-attack includes hacking websites, conducting distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, spamming, trolling, and spreading malicious software. The main targets in these cases are state institutions or computer-dependent facilities ([Jamejam Online](#) January 26, 2011). For Tehran, this second form of cyber-terrorism has caused considerable

damage and had a long-term impact on Iran’s financial, informational, and industrial institutions. In turn, the Iranian hackers who accessed the Bowman Avenue Dam in 2013 had access to information about the dam’s operations, including control of its sluice gate, which as it happens had been disconnected for maintenance at the time.

“Hard” and “Soft” Threats

Iran employs multiple actors, including internet-focused military units, or proxies with alleged links to the IRGC, to carry out its cyber-attacks. The increasing number of attempts to disrupt networks, deface websites and infiltrate U.S. institutions reflects the growing importance of digital warfare to Tehran.

Meanwhile, at the heart of Iran’s concept of cyber-terrorism is the perception of continued foreign, U.S.-led attacks aimed at regime change in Tehran. Even following the nuclear deal, Iran sees itself as a target of mainly U.S. and Israeli cyber-attacks, intended to damage institutions and undermine the country’s values, identity and social stability.

Tehran has developed multiple strategies for tackling both hard and soft cyber-threats to its own institutions, and these will continue to evolve as the digital landscape evolves and new communication technologies are developed

Nima Adelkhah is an independent analyst based in New York. His current research agenda includes the Middle East, military strategy and technology and nuclear proliferation, among other defense and security issues.

Boko Haram: Two Years on Shekau and Buhari Still Face Pressure Over the Chibok Schoolgirls

Jacob Zenn

The two-year anniversary of Boko Haram's kidnapping of more than 250 schoolgirls in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria passed on April 13, 2016. Evidently, international interest in the Chibok kidnapping has waned. Even after CNN aired footage from a video showing 15 of the schoolgirls there was little buzz on the airwaves. The footage was from one of two "proof-of-life" videos from Boko Haram that can be dated to December 2015, and it constituted the first images of the hostages seen in nearly two years.

In Nigeria, by contrast, the #BringBackOurGirls movement and the media have maintained pressure on President Muhammadu Buhari and his administration to stay focused on freeing the Chibok schoolgirls, even as Buhari and his administration have kept up a counter-insurgency operation that has weakened Boko Haram. Nevertheless, if Buhari, who took office in May 2015, cannot free any of the Chibok schoolgirl hostages, his legacy may be marred by this perceived failure.

This article discusses the pressures on both Buhari and Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau to negotiate over the Chibok schoolgirl hostages, especially in the context of Boko Haram's strained relations with Islamic State (IS); the role of Shekau's spokesman Abu Zinnira in holding some of the Chibok schoolgirls; and the calculations that Buhari is likely undertaking regarding the effect of conceding to Boko Haram demands on the sustainability of his counter-insurgency efforts.

Pressure on Shekau as Islamic State Support Wanes

Pressure to negotiate a ransom for the Chibok schoolgirls is not only on Buhari; there is growing incentive for Boko Haram leader Shekau to reach a deal. Shekau has seen Boko Haram forces weakened and forced to retreat into Nigeria's borderlands during the Nigerian government's ongoing military offensive. Moreover, Shekau can no longer count on outside support from al-Qaeda, from

whose orbit Boko Haram departed when Shekau pledged allegiance to Islamic State leader Abubakar al-Baghdadi in March 2015. Shekau then became the *wali*, or governor, of IS' so-called "West Africa Province" ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 17, 2015).

Despite Shekau's pledge and the initial praise for the Chibok kidnapping in IS' *Dabiq* magazine in October 2014, IS has not maintained its financial, logistical, and moral support. In fact, since late 2015, IS has largely ignored Boko Haram. Current circumstances preventing a deepening of their relationship can be blamed for this, as opposed to tensions between the two groups.

Such circumstances include the following:

First, the new IS leader in Libya, Shaykh Abd-al-Qadir al-Najdi, appears to no longer prioritize Nigeria or West Africa Province unlike his predecessor the late Abu-al-Mughirah al-Qahtani ([al-Akhbar](#), January 14, 2014). Under al-Qahtani, Nigeria and Libya were often associated together as a broader theater to which foreign fighters could "migrate to Africa." Al-Najdi, however, seems to see Libya only in connection to Syria and Iraq, and not Nigeria. Exemplifying this, Nigerians are now featured in IS media fighting in Libya without any reference to West Africa Province. Al-Najdi may have decided not to expend waning resources on West Africa Province, and instead to focus on consolidating IS' control over Sirte and nearby oil-producing areas in Libya as a "fallback option" if IS is routed from Raqqa and Mosul.

Second, the former al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) poet and defector to IS, Shaybah al-Hamad, played a coordinating role between Boko Haram and other IS "provinces" on Twitter, arranging behind-the-scenes communications before Shekau's pledge between IS and Boko Haram members (or former Ansaru members who tacitly accepted Shekau as "governor" of what would become West Africa Province) ([Osun Defender](#), March 8, 2015). However, al-Hamad, who is believed to be Algerian, has been missing since mid-2015. It is possible he was killed along with other AQIM defectors to IS during an Algerian government crackdown ([Daily Star](#), March 14).

Third, at the time Shekau pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi, Mali-based Movement for Unity [Monotheism] and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) leaders, Abu Walid al-Sahrawi and Hamadou al-Kheiry, also pledged

allegiance to al-Baghdadi. This meant there were contiguous IS forces from Nigeria through northern Niger and Mali up to Libya. Since mid-2015, however, MUJAO has dwindled under pressure from more numerous and united AQIM and al-Mourabitoun forces, which eliminated some MUJAO forces after they defected from al-Qaeda ([Lemag.ma](#), September 17, 2015). This has left Boko Haram with no direct supply line to Libya, while shipments to Boko Harm via Chad are more likely to be intercepted as part of Chad's ongoing cooperation with Nigeria to counter Boko Haram's arms trafficking ([Pulse.ng](#), April 21).

Fourth, Boko Haram's unanticipated territorial losses in Shekau's declared "Islamic State" in northeastern Nigeria—a territory announced prior to Shekau's 2015 pledge to al-Baghdadi—has reduced Boko Haram's attractiveness to IS. Boko Haram is no longer "breaking" the Nigeria-Cameroon border like it was in 2014 and thus supporting IS' media strategy to publicize attempts to "break" the Iraqi-Syrian and Tunisian-Libyan borders. More broadly, Boko Haram now holds few territories that IS can advertise to show governance, which in Boko Haram's case involved sharia punishments and large assemblies of civilians praying under Boko Haram's watch. Instead, Boko Haram has mostly been retreating in 2016 ([Vanguard](#), April 12). This is contrary to the IS brand for its West Africa Province and other 'provinces', and reduces incentive for deeper collaboration.

Fifth, and finally, despite pledging and re-affirming his allegiance to al-Baghdadi, Shekau has retained his interest in the Lake Chad region and has been more "provincial" than the IS worldview. For example, while Shekau no longer appears publicly in videos per IS regulations for the leaders of its "provinces," Shekau issued audio recordings in August 2015 and September 2015. These recordings threatened the "Nigerian tyrant Buhari" and sought to dispel rumors in the media, started by Chadian President Idris Deby, that Shekau had been "decapitated" in an internal coup by former Mali-based militant Mahamat Daoud, who opposed Shekau's pledge al-Baghdadi ([Guardian \[Nigeria\]](#), August 16, 2015; [Naji.com](#), September 20, 2015). Both of these audios were not official IS media productions, although they were in the name of West Africa Province and promoted on IS Twitter accounts. This may indicate that instead of these recordings originating from IS' centralized media agencies, Shekau pushed for their release because he was concerned about losing his support

base in the Lake Chad region. After a six-month hiatus in video production from November 2015 until April 2016, IS also released a video of West Africa Province confirming Shekau as governor after rumors on Nigerian online media suggested that Shekau was surrendering ([This Day](#), April 2) This also suggests that West Africa Province is still oriented towards the Lake Chad region, rather than the global Caliphate, insofar as Shekau-related communications are concerned. It could also imply that Shekau maintains a degree of autonomy and that the integration of Boko Haram with IS is, as a consequence, still incomplete (IS may nonetheless be able to cater to Shekau's Lake Chad region focus by reviving MUJAO as its "Greater Sahara Province" and allowing Shekau to reign over his preferred Lake Chad region).

Understanding Abu Zinnira

As a result of the lack of support and guidance from IS, Shekau is likely independently negotiating for the release of the Chibok schoolgirls via his spokesman, Abu Zinnira, who he designated to that role after Boko Haram's first internationally publicized kidnapping-for-ransom of a French family of seven in Cameroon in February 2013 ([Premium Times](#), March 19, 2013; [Sahara Reporters](#), March 19, 2013). The video that CNN received of the 15 schoolgirls featured Abu Zinnira asking the schoolgirls questions about their names and background. It is possible that, given of the similarity of the questioning style and tone of voice, Abu Zinnira was also the unidentified interviewer in the first Boko Haram video of the schoolgirls from May 2014.

Abu Zinnira also seems to represent Ansaru influence on Boko Haram. A video posted to Youtube in February 2015 by Abu Zinnira, for example, details Usman Dan Fodio's Caliphate in Nigeria in the 19th century and suggests that it culminated with al-Baghdadi's declaration of a Caliphate in Mosul, Iraq in 2014 ([Youtube](#), February 8, 2015). Usman Dan Fodio was exclusively part of the Ansaru narrative until Shekau's first video claiming the Chibok kidnapping in May 2014, when the Boko Haram leader claimed "Usman Dan Fodio is our own." Moreover, the kidnapping of the French family and four other kidnappings in Cameroon in 2013 and 2014 not only bore Ansaru tactical influence, with one kidnapping jointly claimed by Boko Haram and Ansaru, but also began at the time when Ansaru began phasing out of Nigeria and some its members likely would have joined with Boko Haram ([France24.com](#), November 16, 2013).

Abu Zinnira's apparent relation to Ansaru is consistent with the likely role of some former Ansaru kidnapping experts in the Chibok operation. Moreover, some Ansaru members' integration into Boko Haram under Shekau's leadership in what later became West Africa Province would also explain why there was the IS-tailored messaging in Shekau's first video claim of the Chibok kidnapping. In that video, Shekau not only referred to Usman Dan Fodio, but also chanted distinctly IS slogans in the opening scene, such as "The Islamic State remains, the Islamic State is established" in Arabic ([YouTube](#), May 5, 2014).

If Abu Zinnira has been overseeing the Chibok schoolgirls since the May 2014 video and is responsible for the latest video broadcast by CNN, and if he has been Shekau's spokesman since "day one" of the kidnapping, then it means that Shekau himself likely has a degree of control over the schoolgirls' fate. In turn, this makes it unlikely that separate deals can be made with the alleged factions that are holding the schoolgirls. Rather, Shekau through Abu Zinnira is likely still in control.

Buhari's Options

Given Shekau's likely desire for resources that are not coming from IS and the potential value of the Chibok schoolgirls, Shekau may see an exchange for the schoolgirls as an important part of a Boko Haram rejuvenation. This may, however, be exactly what President Buhari fears in a deal. In fact, the more than three-million dollars and 20 freed members from prison that Boko Haram received in exchange from the French family kidnapped in northern Cameroon in April 2013 provided an important boost for Boko Haram at that time (despite the infighting over the money it also caused) and may be a "lesson learned" for Buhari ([AFK Insider](#), March 9).

In terms of strategy, Shekau and Abu Zinnira may be seeking a staggered negotiation in which the 15 schoolgirls shown in the video broadcast by CNN are released for a large sum of money, after which a second group, then a third, and a fourth are exchanged. The question then is how many groups are there? The latest proof-of-life video only shows 15 schoolgirls. Supposing Shekau only directly controls those 15 schoolgirls, controls only a few groups, or even that only some of the schoolgirls are still alive, would it then be worth Buhari making a deal with Boko Haram while dozens of other schoolgirls

remain captive who Boko Haram could later use to blackmail the government?

Alternatively, Buhari could continue to send the military on search and destroy operations deep into Sambisa Forest in hopes of locating the schoolgirls ([This Day](#), May 3). The arrests this year of high-level Boko Haram members and associates—such as former Ansaru mastermind Khalid al-Barnawi in Kogi State in April, and Abdalla Adamou, Boko Haram's lead kidnapping negotiator, in Cameroon in February—could yield valuable intelligence on the schoolgirls' location to support a covert rescue operation ([Vanguard](#), April 3). A military operation, however, runs the risk of many, or possibly all, of the schoolgirls being killed during the rescue attempt. Moreover, some of the schoolgirls may have been brought across the Cameroonian border to Boko Haram camps in Mayo-Sava, where the Nigerian military has no access and Cameroonian forces still have only a small presence.

President Buhari could also play the waiting game. Shekau has enemies and rivals within Boko Haram, and likely also AQIM, as a result of his pledge to al-Baghdadi. He could be assassinated, injured, fall ill, or killed in a military strike or an internal coup. If Shekau was no longer the Boko Haram leader, the dynamics of the group's hold over the schoolgirls could change and lead to new opportunities to negotiate their release. Moreover, if AQIM and Boko Haram formed a new alliance in the wake of Shekau's demise, it is possible AQIM would encourage the schoolgirls' release because al-Qaeda has generally opposed the enslavement of even "infidel" women as a net negative to al-Qaeda's brand.

At the same time, any delay in negotiations runs risks for Buhari. Shekau could set his own terms by upping the ante with a new video of the schoolgirls to place psychological pressure on Nigerian society and Buhari to negotiate. Now that Boko Haram communications all go through IS, however, such a threat would likely need to be vetted by the IS' centralized media team (the video broadcast by CNN was not intended for the public, which is why there was no branding on it).

At present, it seems Buhari is too concerned about the possibilities for corruption by intermediaries in any payment to Boko Haram. Thus, in the short-term, it seems Buhari will wait until Boko Haram provides a more conclusive connection to Shekau himself beyond Abu Zinni-

ra, as well as proof that more than 15 schoolgirls are alive and well.

Continued Threat

The fate of the Chibok schoolgirls remains more than a humanitarian issue. A deal could make or break Boko Haram's finances moving forward. A failure to make a deal could also tarnish President Buhari's legacy and, if his opponents accuse him of neglecting the schoolgirls on what is a deeply emotional issue, affect his chances of winning the next presidential election. A change in political power in Nigeria, even several years from now, could also disrupt Nigeria's momentum against Boko Haram.

That Boko Haram has held the Chibok schoolgirls captive for two years without any of them being rescued suggests that despite setbacks the militants' well-established logistics networks in the Lake Chad region are still in place. Meanwhile, the group's ties to IS and its continued ability to carry out major operations, sporadic though these have become, indicate Boko Haram remains a significant threat and that its current decline will not necessarily be permanent.

Jacob Zenn is a Fellow of African and Eurasian Affairs at The Jamestown Foundation.