NEW ZEALAND: WILL NEW ZEALAND LOOK TO AUSTRALIA TO EXPAND ANTI-TERRORISM LEGISLATION

Brian M. Perkins

On March 15, a mass shooting at the al-Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand left 50 people dead and at least 50 others injured. The suspect, Brenton Tarrant, is a 28-year-old Australian that authorities have described as a violent, right-wing extremist. Tarrant livestreamed the attack, and the video ultimately began circulating on the internet. The attack primarily underscored the threat of right-wing extremism in New Zealand, but it also pointed to how vulnerable the state could be to similar style attacks in the future and raised the specter of attacks motivated by vengeance.

Following the shooting in Christchurch, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal

Muslimeen (JNIM) released a joint statement condemning the attack and calling on Muslims to retaliate. The groups vowed that the mass shooting would "not pass without a response" ([Jihadology](#), March 18). Countless

other terrorist groups including al-Shabaab, Ansar al-Islam, Ansar al-Din, and pro-IS groups have issued similar statements threatening attacks against Westerners in New Zealand, Australia, and more broadly against the rest of the West ([Jihadology](#), March 16).

Inconsistencies with the application of anti-terrorism laws will likely mean Tarrant will never actually face terrorism charges, despite politicians referring to the shooting as a terrorist attack. However, the violent incident coupled with calls for retaliation will likely lead to a political response that will serve to broaden counter-terrorism strategies as a whole rather than just addressing the particular brand of ideology underlying the shooting.

New Zealand has already rushed through proposed legislation to ban assault rifles and will likely look to review or amend other related legislation as a catch all. New Zealand does not have as broad or expansive anti-terrorism legislation as nearby Australia. In fact, anti-terrorism legislation in Australia seems to broaden each year, most recently with proposed laws allowing Australian dual citizens to be stripped of their citizenship, granting access to encrypted messaging platforms, and establishing that "there will be a presumption that neither bail nor parole will be granted to those persons who have

demonstrated support for, or have links to, terrorist activity" (See Terrorism Monitor, January 11). [1] Meanwhile, New Zealand's laws have remained relatively static, with only a few amendments to the Terrorism Suppression Act of 2007.

While Tarrant was not on authorities' radar, among the top provisions of the Terrorism Suppression Act of 2007 that will likely come under review is a provision that limits warrantless surveillance to a 24-hour period as well as the state's ability to monitor social media (Stuff.co.nz, March 31, 2016). In view of preventing such attacks from recurring, politicians could seek to broaden the state's ability to proactively surveil suspects for longer periods of time while expanding the scope of activities that might facilitate such surveillance.

New Zealand and Australia maintain a close counter-terrorism partnership and Australian legislation provides a ready-made template for New Zealand to draw from. However, doing so would be an outsized response given that the threat profile to New Zealand is still significantly lower than that of Australia and this specific attack and the subsequent calls for retaliation do not necessarily indicate an upward trend.

Notes

[1] See Justice Legislation (Links to Terrorist Activity) Amendment Bill 2018 *https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/Documents/TableOffice/TabledPapers/2018/5618T1852.PDF*

AFGHANISTAN: TALIBAN-U.S. PEACE TALKS RAISE NEW SECURITY THREATS

Brian M. Perkins

Taliban and U.S. representatives concluded their most substantial round of peace talks in Doha, Qatar on March 12. The talks ended with some progress, but no final agreement on the withdrawal of foreign troops and Taliban assurances that the country will not be used as a staging ground for attacks on other countries (Tolo News, February 23). The Afghan government has so far been left out of the process and is expected to remain out of the loop until the timeline for withdrawal is established and a new round of talks begin.

While the results of the latest round of negotiations have largely been viewed as welcome progress, with each side expressing cautious optimism, the prospect of a peace deal with the Taliban also presents numerous new security challenges. Aside from the most obvious challenge of attempting to bring longtime Taliban members into the government fold and integrating them within the administrative fabric, there is also a significant challenge posed by recalcitrant Taliban members unwilling to surrender, and the likelihood of disenfranchised members to join up with the local Islamic State (IS) branch, Islamic State-Khurasan (IS-K).

The Taliban and its associated groups, including the Haqqani Network, are relatively decentralized and often members' allegiance is to their field commander and local comrades first. Although the Taliban has included prominent members from different cross sections of the group in its negotiating team, it is likely that many of the factions will be reluctant to lay down their arms, opting instead to continue their ongoing mission or, in a slightly better scenario, end the insurgency but continue reaping the benefits of other illicit activities—such as taxing poppy cultivation, illegal mining, or smuggling (UNODC, May 21, 2018). If there are factions that do not agree to lay down their arms, there will be a persistent threat that those who do are not genuinely doing so and will infiltrate various government, security, or administrative entities, or that some will eventually join back up with the factions that held out.

Another key scenario that should be closely monitored is the likelihood of Taliban members joining up with IS-K, which has surged in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region

over the past year as core IS has lost territory in Syria and Iraq. IS-K and the Taliban have historically clashed over IS-K's hardline approach, but that has not prevented disenfranchised Taliban members from joining the group (See [Terrorism Monitor](#), August 10, 2018). IS-K has also recently softened its approach and rhetoric in order to draw in more recruits. IS-K, in many ways, poses more of a threat outside of Afghanistan than the Taliban does and, unlike the Taliban, has intentions to strike Pakistan as well. With IS-K's significant number of foreign fighters and the core IS' increased focus on turning toward other exploitable locations outside Syria and Iraq, Afghanistan could see a surge in foreign fighters and the recruitment of disenfranchised Taliban members.

In conducting peace talks with the Taliban, local and international security teams will need to come up with creative and well-laid plans to prevent the fracturing of the Taliban or a sudden surge in the ranks of IS-K. One significant issue in doing so is that an agreement on the withdrawal of foreign troops is foundational in securing a peace deal, and it is unclear how quickly the second order effects of a peace deal will present themselves.

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Asset or Victims: A Portrait of Women Within al-Shabaab

Sunguta West

Al-Shabaaab, the Somalia-based terror group, has been largely portrayed as a male organization in its more-than-decade-long operational history, but it's now emerging that women are also at the center of one of Africa's deadliest insurgencies.

The group, al-Qaeda's terror network affiliate in East Africa, is waging its war from bases in southern Somalia, with the aim of overthrowing the UN-backed government and replacing it with one governed through Sharia (Islamic) law. Its violent actions have also been felt in neighboring Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda.

Since 2006, the militant group has been the subject of African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops' military operations, but the force has remained resilient despite the onslaught by the better armed African militaries.

In al-Shabaab's campaign of terror, there are women who play key roles. They are not mere victims, but active players who the group heavily relies on for non-combative roles. These are indirect roles and are viewed as more important for the survival of the group than the female actors moving to the frontlines as combatants ([The East African,](#) January 31, 2018).

The profile of women within al-Shabaab and their role has appeared to rise over the years. Many of them are victims of multiple rapes and brutal treatment by the militants. Some of the women have escaped from the battleground to tell their own story and the stories of those still remaining in al-Shabaab camps.

Female jihadists within al-Shabaab were not considered a key factor in al-Shabaab until the emergence of British national Samantha Lewthwaite, also known as the "White Widow," or Sherafiyah Lewthwaite. After the Nairobi Westgate Mall shopping terror attack in September 2013, Lewthwaite became one of most wanted terror suspects for her role in masterminding the assault which killed more than 60 people ([Nairobi News](#), March 25, 2016).

A member of al-Shabaab, Lewthwaite is also believed to have directed other car and suicide bomb attacks in Somalia and Kenya, including the Garissa University College attack during which 148 people—mainly Christian students—were killed ([Standard Media,](#) Jan 5, 2016).

Lewthwaite, the widow of Germaine Lindsay, the 7/7 London terrorist bomber, is wanted in Kenya for being in possession of explosives and conspiracy to commit a crime. She has been accused of planning and executing grenade attacks on churches. A grenade attack that hit fans watching football in a bar in Mombasa during the Euro 2012 soccer championship was believed to part of her work. The female jihadist's whereabouts remain unknown to date, but there is speculation that she is hiding somewhere in Yemen under the protection of al-Shabaab fighters ([Brits in Kenya,](#) December 31, 2018).

Her reputation as an intelligent female jihadist is believed to have inspired more young women to join al-Shabaab. Initially, it was the less educated women, but it is now emerging that university students enrolled in prestigious degrees such as medicine and pharmacy are targets. These are young, intelligent, beautiful, and deadly women, and join the militant group as al-Shabaab brides ([AWC,](#) August 1, 2015; [Garowe Online,](#) January 20).

Over the years, al-Shabaab's affinity for women recruits has been on the rise. Kenyan security services highlighted the development after the DusitD2 shopping complex attack in Nairobi on January 15. Security agents had also arrested girls and women travelling to join the group in Somalia in the recent past.

In the DusitD2 attack, two al-Shabaab women are believed to have worked alongside the mastermind Ali Salim Gichuge and Amniyat, al-Shabaab's intelligence wing, to plan and executive the deadly assault. One of the women, Khadija alias Violet Kemunto was described as Gichuge's wife. On her Whatsapp profile, the woman described herself as an al-Shabaab bride ([Daily Nation,](#) January 17). Days before the attack, she put household properties up for sale, indicating that they were moving. Part of the properties included shoes, a 49-inch TV set, a sofa, a rice cooker, and a refrigerator ([The Star](#), January 18; [Pulse Live,](#) January 17). By the time the police sought to arrest and question her about her role in the attack, Khadija was already on the run with reports speculating that she crossed into Somalia and was probably plotting a further escape ([Kenyans,](#) January 24).

Another woman named Mariam Abdi is believed to have trafficked the weapons used in the DusitD2 attack from Somalia. Abdi, like the Gichuge, was in Somalia between 2012 and 2016. Security agencies said she was a link between the attackers and Amniyat. The woman, who hails from Mombasa, is also said to be on the run ([Standard Digital,](#) January 19).

About four years ago, Kenyan security agencies arrested Khadija Abu-Bakr, then a 19-year-old student who was studying pharmacy at Mount Kenya University. The young woman had attempted to sneak into Somalia to join al-Shabaab with other students. Ummul-Kheir studied medicine at the International University of Africa in Khartoum, while Maryam Said Aboud studied Commerce at Kenyatta University in Nairobi ([Daily Nation,](#) March 3).

Still, the scope of women's involvement in al-Shabaab remains unknown, but security experts have advanced various reasons why they joined the militant group.

Some embarked on the risky journey to join their husbands who moved to Somalia after being recruited and left their families behind. With no means of livelihood, the women have taken the risky option of travelling to the battlefront.

Among several key driving factors, the search for revenge against Kenyan authorities for ill-treatment of their relatives has been seen as one of the reasons why the women join the militant group. Recently, extrajudicial killings blamed on the police have occurred in Kenya's coastal region. Also, the police have allegedly been very brutal when dealing with suspects. Some of the suspects and innocent civilians have disappeared. These factors, among others, have conspired to push the women into the jungles of southern Somalia ([The East African,](#) January 3, 2018).

Analysts say a number have travelled on their own, believing that joining the terror group is a form of empowerment, liberation and a chance to live in a region where the belief system is similar to their own. In most cases, this has proved to be contrary, as many have been turned into sex slaves or forced to marry multiple lovers ([Daily Nation](#), January 20).

Kidnapping, deception, blackmailing, and violent force are other methods that have been used to increase the number of women in al-Shabaab. Like their male counterparts, they have been lured with the promise of a better paying job, before being tricked into travelling to Somalia, where they have ended up in the hands of the militants (The Standard Digital, December 23, 2017).

According to analysts, many of the women who find themselves in Somalia are trained as suicide bombers or become intelligence gatherers and spies for al-Shabaab's intelligence wing, the Amniyat. The roles as spies are preferred, since in most incidents, women do not easily raise suspicion (The East African, January 3, 2018).

In the battlefront, women support the fighters by providing shelter and hiding the terrorists or family members involved in the group. Also, they are known to provide medical care for injured fighters, while the majority of others are cooks and provide cleaning services in the camps (Daily Nation, March 3, 2018).

Those who are recruited but fail to travel to Somalia are known to act as local recruitment agents for the militant group. Four years ago, the police arrested Hussein Sarah Hassan and five youth she had recruited. Hassan had allegedly travelled to Somalia several times (Tuko News, 2011, Accessed on March 19).

Some help in planning local attacks, help form terror cells and channel finances to the terror organization. They are known to take food to family members in police custody over terror charges. Others facilitate financial transactions to fund the operations of the group.

Conclusion

It is now emerging that women are starting to play a key role within al-Shabaab. While they are not known to be on the frontline, they are supporting the war through other actions such as intelligence and information gathering, cooking for the fighters and offering medical care, among other roles.

These core roles are essential to al-Shabaab's survival. Therefore, forces trying to end the insurgency should pay more attention to women's recruitment both within and outside Somalia, with a view to ending it. One way that Kenya can help end the recruitment of women is to offer support to those who have been left behind and rehabilitate those who are returning after years living in southern Somalia.

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The Maldives Faces Dual Challenge of Terrorist Returnees and Extremist Hate Campaigns

Animesh Roul

The Maldives, the smallest nation in South Asia, has witnessed it all in the last several years amid periodic political instabilty: Islamic radicalization, forced disappearances, foreign fighters, and crackdowns on free speech. At present, the archipelago nation is grappling with several new challenges—the problem of war refugees/returnees and growing religious dissent, with increasing amounts of hate campaigns on social media.

On February 21, the country's elite counter-terrorism agency, the National Counter-Terrorism Center (NCTC) in the capital Male, announced that six women wish to return home to the Maldives with their families. These women are in fact the war widows of Maldivian militants who died fighting alongside jihadist factions in Syria and Iraq. The director of NCTC, Brig. Gen. Zakariyya Mansoor, cautiously said in a press conference that even though multiple agencies are working toward facilitating families', and many others', safe return to the country, authorities face many challenges in doing so, including the lack of identification documents for the children born in war zones (Maldives Times, February 21). While the Maldivian government is still weighing options to bring back its citizens and their children, the death of a Maldivian woman and her two children in Syria was reported on March 6 as the Islamic State's (IS) last remaining territory in Syria falls apart (The Sun, March 12).

Like the Maldives, countries worldwide are facing the challenge of how to deal with women and their children returning from the Syrian war theater. Undoubtedly, the situation is as alarming as the male fighters' homecoming, but agencies in the Maldives remain largely clueless about the nature of threats these female returnees will pose back home.

In mid-2014, then-Minister of Islamic Affairs Mohamed Shaheem Ali Saeed issued a diktat urging Maldivians to refrain from participating in foreign wars (Minivan Archive, July 2, 2014). The Anti-Terrorism Act of 2015 later criminalized any participation in other people's (foreign) civil wars and under the law, any individual caught attempting to leave the Maldives to join a foreign civil war could be jailed for 10 to 15 years. Despite this, the Maldives experienced this militant exodus as scores of radicalized Maldivians have left the country to fight with armed groups in the Middle East, including the al-Qaeda linked factions like Jabhat al-Nusra or the more recent hybrid group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), as well as the Islamic State (IS). The government at present maintains that 61 people so far have joined the wars in Syria. However, the foreign agencies monitoring the foreign terrorist fighter issue in the Syrian civil war roughly estimated the total number of participants to 250, the highest per capita rate in the South Asian region.

Meanwhile, several Maldivian fighters who have returned from Syria and Pakistan are roaming free in the country. Returnees like Ahmed Latheef, Ahmed Suhail Moosa and Munawwar Abdulla are some of the first militants to be charged with traveling abroad with the intent of joining terror groups in early 2016. However, they have been acquitted for lack of evidence even though they were arrested in Turkey, and one of them claimed to be in "the sacred land of *Shām* (the Levant) to seek *Jannat-ul Firdaus* (Heaven)," according to his telegram chat and call records (Maldives Independent, October 23, 2017). Similarly, Mohamed Abdul Rahman, who had fought in Pakistan's Waziristan alongside the Pakistani Taliban for over a decade, is free in the Maldives as the criminal court cleared the charges against him as prosecutors could not prove he had taken part in fighting after the 2015 Anti-Terrorism Act came into force (Maldives Independent, August 5, 2018).

These acquittals can be blamed on the Maldivian police's lack of expertise in anti-terrorism investigations, a fear of domestic backlash resulting in a lack of political will, or indecision to prosecute these war returnees—mostly hailed as Islamic heroes in the country.

Correspondingly, death threats and fatal attacks against liberal or secular individuals have become routine. Most recently, a covert Islamist group ran a Telegram channel "*Murtad* (apostate) Watch MV," posting pictures and information of people that they have labeled as "apostates," "enemies of Islam" or "*laadheenee*" (irreligious or secular) for speaking against archaic practices of Islam broadly and a death by stoning verdict against a woman adulterer in the Maldives (Maldives Indepen-

dent, January 7; <u>Maldives Times</u>, January 9). This telegram channel remains active, issuing life-threatening messages ever since it emerged online in November 2018. The channel is currently followed by hundreds of subscribers.

In the past, Islamist gang members launched several religiously motivated attacks in the Maldives and security forces' lack of action against the culprits forced several writers and scholars to flee the country for safety. Alarmingly, in the Maldives, there has been no robust action taken against Islamist networks that are suspected to be behind "*Murtad* Watch" like campaigns on earlier occasions. These networks are suspected to be behind the murders of writers and secular scholars like Yameen Rasheed (April 2017), Ahmed Rilwan (August 2014) and Afrasheem Ali (October 2012).

The Maldives, which claims to be a 100 percent Muslim (Sunni) nation, has failed to prosecute any perpetrators of violence against liberal and secular individuals, who have received death threats and been branded as apostates for their advocacy for freedom of belief or criticism against Islam.

The Maldives' Ministry of Islamic Affairs largely admitted the existence of these problems in a policy paper in April 2018, highlighting policy gaps around apostasy, religious freedom, and foreign fighters. This policy paper and its recommendations notwithstanding, all eyes are on the present democratic government under President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, who has vowed to investigate and take actions against growing religious intolerance and extremism.

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The Return of Al-Qaeda's Faction in Nigeria: What's Going on in Zamfara?

Jacob Zenn

The northwestern Nigerian state of Zamfara, has reportedly experienced more than 180 deaths and 300 kidnappings in March 2019 alone (<u>Twitter.com/A_Salkida,</u> March 17). Zamfara has otherwise avoided much of the militancy that has haunted northern Nigeria in the past several years. So, what explains this sudden uptick in violence in Zamfara, and why now?

According to one hypothesis, a driving force behind the rise of militancy in not only Zamfara but also extending to neighbouring parts of Sokoto and potentially elsewhere in northwestern Nigeria is the revival of Jamaatu Ansarul Muslimin fi Biladis Sudan (Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa), better known as "Ansaru." This article rehashes the history of Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria; its retreat to Libya; assesses whether it is already or can become immersed into the cells of so-called "rural bandits" in Zamfara and environs; take advantage of the leadership crisis in Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) to reassert its influence in Nigeria; and provide the militant forces in Zamfara an insurgent model based on that of the al-Qaeda-aligned jihadists in Ansaroul Islam and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) in the Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali border axis, whose areas of operations are only around 300 miles from Zamfara itself.

The key contribution of Ansaru to militancy in Zamfara, therefore, may not only be expertise in kidnappings, ambushes, and robbery, but also organizing the armed actors into a more coherent politically oriented jihadist project by learning lessons from their own failure to do that in Nigeria from 2011 to 2013 and some of their al-Qaeda brethren's successes in doing that in Mali since 2013.

Background: The AQIM Pedigree in Nigeria

From as early August 2009 when al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) provided 200,000 euros and training to Boko Haram, it referred to Boko Haram as its "representative (*mumathil*)" in Nigeria. However, AQIM later

favored the formation of Ansaru over Boko Haram in January 2012 and Ansaru became its primary ally ([Al-Andalus,](#) April 28, 2017). Ansaru emerged on the scene in Nigeria with a series of kidnappings of foreign engineers in the style of its AQIM patrons, which had previously been unprecedented in the country's north and had not been in Boko Haram's repertoire, including:

- A British and Italian engineer, who were killed in March 2012 in Sokoto after being kidnapped in May 2011 in Kebbi.
- A German engineer, who was killed in Kano in May 2012 after being kidnapped in January 2012 in the same city.
- A group of engineers, including British, Filipino, and Lebanese, who were killed near Shekau's base in Sambisa Forest, Borno in February 2013 after being kidnapped weeks earlier in Bauchi ([Vanguard](#), February 18, 2013).

Ansaru also kidnapped a French engineer in Katsina in December 2012, but he escaped custody in Kaduna in November 2013 ([France 24,](#) November 17, 2013). Aside from kidnappings, Ansaru was involved in a prison break in Abuja in November 2012 and an ambush on Mali-bound Nigerian troops in Kogi State in January 2013 ([Vanguard,](#) January 20, 2013). Ansaru's claims all indicated alignment with al-Qaeda and the Taliban, opposition to Shekau's killing of innocents and brutality, and a desire to "defend" Muslims from Christians in central Nigeria ([jihadology.net,](#) May 14, 2013; [Desert Herald,](#) June 2, 2012).

There were various other attacks that Ansaru members did not claim or that it carried out in "cooperation" with Boko Haram despite their "differences" after an AQIM-brokered reconciliation between some Ansaru militants and Boko Haram. For example, in November 2013 when Boko Haram claimed kidnapping a French priest in Cameroon it noted the operation was "coordinated" with Ansaru ([France24,](#) November 15, 2013). Meanwhile, other kidnappings, especially in Cameroon in 2013 and 2014, were likely also carried out by Boko Haram and Ansaru militants together but no claim indicated such cooperation any further. Unlike the kidnappings by Ansaru in Nigeria in 2012 that led to the deaths of hostages, in Cameroon hostages were ransomed for millions of dollars four times, vastly boosting Boko Haram's coffers ([lejournalinternational.fr,](#) February 7, 2014).

The trend of Ansaru-claimed attacks from 2011 to 2013 demonstrated it primarily operated around northwestern Nigeria, such as in the states of Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Kano, Abuja, Kogi, and only later Bauchi and even Sambisa in Borno, whereas Boko Haram primarily operated in northeastern Nigeria, especially Yobe and Borno. Kano was arguably a point where both groups converged. Ansaru's public announcement of its founding in Kano after consulting with AQIM on January 26, 2012, also was only days after Shekau ordered what was then Boko Haram's largest ever attack: a raid of Kano that killed more than 200 people, mostly innocent civilians ([Vanguard,](#) February 1, 2012). Not only were some of Ansaru's claims released through AQIM channels and AQIM intermediaries, but even its first kidnapping in Kano was claimed by AQIM's Andalus media agency itself. ([jihadology.net,](#) January 22, 2013 ; [lexpress.fr,](#) March 21, 2013 ; [jihadology.net,](#) June 12, 2012). One could conclude Ansaru was an "extension" of AQIM in Nigeria but that it primarily operated in the northwest to remain away from Shekau, who killed Ansaru members for defecting from him, and because the core of Ansaru members were Hausas and Fulanis, and not Kanuris from Borno and Yobe like Shekau.

A number of Ansaru's leaders had also trained and fought with AQIM in the Sahel, especially Khalid al-Barnawi and Abu Muhammed al-Bauchi: the former eventually cooperated with Shekau before his 2016 arrest in Kogi and the latter was killed by security forces after a "tip" led to his hideout. This tip possibly came from members of Shekau's faction who wanted him eliminated for defying Shekau ([Leadership,](#) March 26, 2012). They were not only receiving advice and consulting AQIM before they announced Ansaru's founding, but some of their co-fighters were also in northern Mali during the AQIM-allied occupation of that region in 2012 and 2013 ([jihadology.net,](#) September 9, 2013). However, after the French-led military intervention alongside Malian, Chadian, and other forces to recapture northern Mali from AQIM and its allies and Shekau's suppression of Ansaru in Nigeria by 2013, Ansaru faded out and some of its members used their combat skills to accumulate personal wealth instead of fighting for the strategic political aims of jihadists ([aymennjawad.org,](#) August 5, 2018). If anything, its legacy consisted of raised threat levels—especially for foreigners in Nigeria—and demonstrating the most visible ties of Nigerian jihadists to AQIM and of opposition to Shekau.

Libya Retreat

Though Ansaru itself may have had around 300 to 500 members and was essentially dismantled in Nigeria, new signs of an Ansaru revival began to emerge in 2016. However, now Ansaru members were being described by the Nigerian security forces as "Islamic State-affiliated" (Punch, February 10, 2016). Ansaru cells were arrested on their way to Libya apparently to meet or train with the Islamic State (IS), which had held the city of Derna in late 2015, where some Nigerians fought. Some Nigerians then fought in IS-held Sirte where several of them appeared in propaganda videos in 2016 (Vanguard, August 23, 2016). Other Nigerians were also reported in the city on IS documents (Menastream, June 13, 2016).

Before this time, in March 2015, Shekau had pledged his allegiance to IS and Boko Haram became the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), but Shekau was deposed by Abu Musab al-Barnawi in August 2016 with the approval of IS (*Jihadology.net, August 3, 2016*). Abu Musab al-Barnawi, in turn, mentioned in his 2018 book that Ansaru members had "joined the convoy of the Caliphate", indicating they joined IS (aymennjawad.org, August 5, 2018).

However, because Abu Musab al-Barnawi was more "moderate" than Shekau, this did not mean those former Ansaru members completely abandoned their opposition to the killing of innocents. In fact, Abu Musab al-Barnawi was notably among the "softest" of IS provincial leaders towards al-Qaeda, having never even criticized the group despite having been the head of the Boko Haram and then ISWAP media team before becoming its leader. On the contrary, Abu Musab al-Barnawi only recalled in his book Boko Haram's "strong ties" to AQIM after his father and former Boko Haram leader, Muhammed Yusuf, was killed by the security forces in 2009 (Al-Andalus, April 28, 2017). He also claimed to have once attempted to flee to IS in Libya but Shekau restricted his travel; it is certainly possible he would have crossed paths with those Ansaru members who were also traveling to Libya around 2016 had he made it there (aymennjawad.org, August 5, 2018). It should also be highlighted that Abu Musab al-Barnawi's "soft" side was also reflected in his consistent statements about not killing innocent Muslims and even allowing "guilty" Muslims, such as anti-jihadist vigilantes,

to be spared so long as they "repented" (jihadology.net, January 27, 2015).

IS was eventually booted from Libya by a combination of government, military, and al-Qaeda forces by the end of 2016. At this point, it appears the Ansaru members would have been stranded there or been able to return to Nigeria to join ISWAP. What is certain, however, is some Ansaru members remained in Libya but with staunch loyalty to al-Qaeda. [1] They may have fought with IS but once it lost they returned to their al-Qaeda foundations. By the end of 2016, there was a mix of Ansaru militants in Libya, most likely with divided IS and al-Qaeda loyalties; a history of moving between ideologically-oriented attacks and criminality; and roots in fighting Mali and the Sahel and northwestern Nigeria. At the same time, in 2018, Abu Musab al-Barnawi's longtime ally, Mamman Nur, who was also relatively "soft" and had ties historically to al-Qaeda— reportedly AQIM and al-Shabab from the 2009-2010 period—was purged from ISWAP and eventually killed on orders from IS (Sahara Reporters, September 14, 2018). In early 2019, Abu Musab al-Barnawi himself was purged from ISWAP in favor of the apparently more hardline Ba Idrisa but also because he was suspected of speaking with "militants in Mali", who would have presumably been aligned with al-Qaeda (Vanguard, March 16). All of this occurred on orders of or in consultation with IS (Twitter.com/ScholarAkassi1, March 11).

As a result of this hardline turn, ISWAP's main areas of operations around Lake Chad are not going to be a friendly place for former Ansaru members to return if they wanted to operate in Nigeria. There would also be a reasonable concern on their part that ISWAP would realign with their longtime nemesis, Shekau, whose fighters are primarily based around Sambisa, especially if the IS commanders who had once seen Shekau as their ally in Nigeria reconsider dethroning him in 2016 so as to expand IS influence in northeastern Nigeria. With Abu Musab al-Barnawi now sidelined in ISWAP, it could make sense that Ansaru and he would realign, especially if he could flee the Lake Chad region and exploit his pedigree as Muhammed Yusuf's son as a safety net to prevent his own assassination.

A Mali Model?

The banditry and abductions in Zamfara have the signature of Ansaru tactics in terms of exploiting their militant

skill to steal money, rob banks and kidnap dozens of civilians, including a Lebanese in Kano, who was kidnapped and killed in March in an operation that had the scent of Ansaru's first kidnapping of a British and Italian engineer in Kebbi in May 2011 (Sahara Reporters, March 2015). At the time that was suspected to be a "criminal" hostage-taking until Ansaru proved it was clearly behind their kidnapping and subsequent killing (Vanguard, March 8, 2012). The journalist Ahmed Salkida also reports that an Ansaru commander Mairakumi has been active in cattle-rustling in Zamfara (Twitter.com/A_Salkida, March 11). The area of operations in Zamfara would also be conducive to Ansaru because the group has a history in northwestern Nigerian and called for the defense of Muslims, specifically Fulanis, in 2012 and presumably would try to link up with Fulani bandits that operate locally but also move transnationally in the southern Sahel (Desert Herald, June 11, 2012). Moreover, if Lake Chad was precarious for Ansaru members it would make sense for them to keep its distance from ISWAP just as it kept distance from Shekau in 2012.

In Burkina Faso and Mali, Ansoural Islam and JNIM exploited various criminal and ethnic fault lines and anti-government animus to build jihadist networks in the Burkina Faso-Mali-Niger border axis. More recently, those two groups have appeared to align with the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) of Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, even though the group has contradictorily reaffirmed its loyalty to IS since December 2018 (Twitter.com/menastream, March 9). Ansaru would fit in well with both those al-Qaeda-and-IS-aligned groups—Ansaroul Islam, JNIM and ISGS—and could implement their model of jihadism in Zamfara. Considering this, ISWAP's announcement of a brigade in Burkina Faso on March 23, 2019, and IS' orchestration of pledges in the works to Ba Idris from fighters in Western and Central Africa suggests IS is going to challenge al-Qaeda supremacy in the Zamfara-Niger-Burkina Faso-Mali axis (Twitter.com/A_Salkida, March 4).

With Nigerian security forces focused on ISWAP and Shekau's faction in Lake Chad and Sambisa, is anyone watching Zamfara, let alone Burkina Faso? Indeed, *those* two locations are where precautionary kinetic and intelligence measures and "preventing violent extremism" should be taking place.

Notes

[1] Ansaru members on Telegram and Facebook claim to be in Sabha, Libya, according to the author's observations.

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