

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XVII, ISSUE 15

p.1

*Brian M. Perkins*

## BRIEFS

p.3

*Animesh Roul*

Al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri Invokes Kashmir Again, Calls for 'One' Jihad

p.5

*Christopher Smith*

Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: The Easter Bombings and Beyond

p.7

*Jacob Zenn*

A Shia "Boko Haram" Insurgency or Iranian Proxy in Nigeria? Not so Fast

## MOZAMBIQUE: ISLAMIC STATE CLAIMS REVEAL LITTLE ABOUT ANSAR AL-SUNNA

*Brian M. Perkins*

Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP)—which is comprised of a wing in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and one in Mozambique—has claimed responsibility for three attacks in Mozambique since its first on June 4. The latest claim came on July 25, in which the group took responsibility for killing army collaborators and spies in the village of Makoul in Cabo Delgado's Mocimboa da Praia district. The announcement came just one day after Islamic State (IS) released the latest episode of its "And the Best Outcome is for the Righteous" series in which a video purports to show fighters from both the DRC and Mozambique pledging allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ([Jihadology](#), July 24). However, questions as to the veracity of the video remain. The uptick of attacks and the alleged pledge of allegiance indicate the worst is likely still to come for Mozambique, but the ISCAP claims reveal more about core IS' strategy than the nature of Ansar al-Sunna, the group behind the ISCAP claims.

One of the most notable shifts regarding the insurgency in Mozambique since early June has been the public claims for attacks, as Ansar al-Sunna has not historically issued public statements. The claims have also followed core IS' overall rhetorical strategy of promoting its brand of Islam and condemning "crusaders" and "apostates," noting in its latest claim that its fighters "burned multiple houses of apostates as punishment for their loyalty to the Crusaders and their fighting the monotheists." The attacks claimed by ISCAP to date have primarily occurred in the restive Cabo Delgado province and targeted the Mozambican army and alleged government/army collaborators described as "spies," another phrase common across IS propaganda ([Twitter.com/Cmellaniac](#), July 25).

What is particularly interesting about these claims is the fact that the group has not outwardly or publicly portrayed an Islamic identity—unlike many other IS affiliates across the world. While there is evidence to suggest Ansar al-Sunna prescribes to an Islamic ideology, the group has not publicly promoted its motivations or ideology, and locals have similarly not regularly referenced its ideological leanings. The language used in the claims indicates—like is the case for some other affiliates—that they are almost certainly not coming from those on the

ground. The disparities in the two groups' desire to publicly project their ideological proclivities raises skepticism regarding the level of connection between them and whether Ansar al-Sunna will eventually move further into the IS fold. The fact that the claims have started to coincide with confirmed attacks does, however, suggest IS might have open lines of communication. While the nature of the relationship remains unclear, continued claims by ISCAP will only raise Ansar al-Sunna's profile and could entice more and more radicalized individuals from neighboring countries, particularly Tanzania, to join the insurgency.

*Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor*

## **INDONESIA: ARRESTS UNDERSCORE REGIONAL TERROR NETWORK AS GOVERNMENT SETS CONDITIONS FOR RETURN OF IS FIGHTERS**

*Brian M. Perkins*

Despite some notable successes against terrorist organizations in the past few years, including the recent arrest of Jemaah Islamiyah leader Para Wijayanto, Indonesia continues to struggle to contain the threat of terrorism and spread of radical ideology with disjointed counterterrorism tactics and politics. In fact, recent developments have made it clear that radicalized Indonesians with links to its local terrorist groups and Islamic State (IS) pose an increasing and broader regional threat at a time when Indonesia, as well as its neighbors, is preparing for the repatriation of IS fighters.

Authorities in the Philippines and Indonesia confirmed on July 23 that an Indonesian couple described as members of Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD)—Indonesia's IS-aligned terrorist group—were involved in the devastating suicide bombing of a cathedral on Jolo Island in the Philippines ([Jakarta Post](#), July 24). The bombing was claimed by IS and attributed to its affiliate, Abu Sayyaf. A week before they were identified, Indonesia's National Police uncovered a terror financing network that spans Indonesia's regional neighbors such as Malaysia and the Maldives as well as countries further afield, including Afghanistan and Venezuela ([Jakarta Post](#), July 26). The discovery stemmed from the arrest of a JAD operative known as Novendri in West Sumatra. The investigation into Novendri revealed a network led by a militant known as S, who allegedly stayed with IS members in Afghanistan and funded the Indonesian couple's trip to the Philippines.

Several days later, Indonesian President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo decided to reinstate its military Special Operations Command, a.k.a. Koopsus, to work alongside the National Police in an attempt to stem the rising threat from local terrorist groups. Meanwhile, however, Indonesia is preparing for the return of hundreds of IS fighters/sympathizers and their families from Syria, with Defense Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu setting a simple precondition that the returnees make an oath denouncing IS and agreeing not to join local terrorist groups ([Jakarta Globe](#), July 9).

While it is unclear at this time when these individuals will start to return or what, if any, other conditions will be set, it is clear that Indonesian authorities have largely

been unable to track and prevent terror-related activities by those who travelled to fight alongside IS. This includes the couple responsible for the Jolo attack, who were deported back to Indonesia from Turkey after attempting to travel to Syria. Additionally, their return to Indonesia not only poses a threat to the country's own security but also to the security of the Maldives, Malaysia, and the Philippines—where terrorist networks share similar links. These countries do have security agreements in place but the coordination between their respective security apparatuses has been shown to be deeply flawed by the cross-border nature of attacks and financing networks. As each prepares to receive their own fighters, they should also prep for the likelihood that these individuals, if they do return home, will attempt to make their way to neighboring countries to evade persistent surveillance and rejoin IS affiliates. The governments should work to share the identities of their foreign fighters in order to improve the ability for each to detect cross-border operations.

*Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor*

## **Al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri Invokes Kashmir Again, Calls for 'One' Jihad**

*Animesh Roul*

On July 9, al-Qaeda's Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri incited violence against India and Pakistan by vehemently criticizing these neighboring countries for the plight of Muslims in Kashmir. Zawahiri's video message titled "Don't Forget Kashmir" was released by al-Qaeda's propaganda arm, As-Sahab media foundation, on the online messaging platform Telegram. [1] Al-Qaeda, which struggled for many years to establish its foothold in the region, considers Kashmir as a core component of its Islamist campaign in South Asia. In spite of having a dedicated South Asian branch known as al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), it failed miserably to entice Kashmiri youths or militant elements directly into its fold in the past. However, it has been successfully coopting the local Ansar Ghazwat ul-Hind (AGH), founded by a renegade Hizbul Mujahideen militant Zakir Rashid Bhat, (a.k.a. Zakir Musa), since July 2017.

AQIS and AGH have openly showcased jihadist solidarity and the desire for establishing an Islamic state in Kashmir in accordance with Sharia law. Al-Qaeda welcomed AGH's emergence in Kashmir's militant landscape, and on July 27, 2017, announced that the insurgency in Kashmir had entered a stage of awakening and the region was committed to carrying the flag of jihad against India's atrocities. It vowed in a message to liberate Kashmir under Musa's leadership ([New Indian Express](#), July 27, 2017). Following the death of Zakir Musa on May 23, AQIS paid rich tribute to the slain AGH leader and later welcomed the appointment of Abdul Hameed Lelhari (a.k.a. Haroon Abbas) as Musa's successor in early June. Despite having less influence and clout on the ground, both of these groups are often critical of dominant militant groups in Kashmir, such as Hizbul Mujahideen and Lashkar-e-Taiba, for toeing Pakistan's separatist agenda rather than fighting for the supremacy of Islam and Sharia.

Al-Qaeda's latest 14:30-minute-long video surfaced on social media platforms a couple of days after the newly appointed leader of AGH Lelhari released his own anti-Pakistan video, which called for unity among Kashmir mujahideens in the Urdu language ([View Point](#), July 8;

[YouTube](#), July 8). Lelhari accused the Pakistani state of trying to control and dilute Kashmiri jihad and called for an independent and unified Shura council to decide on the operational strategy of the group. Both messages—Zawahiri's and Lelhari's—have several things in common: mobilizing jihadist sentiment in the Kashmir region and enticing more recruits to al-Qaeda and AGH, especially at a time when the rival transnational jihadi group Islamic State (IS) has intensified its campaigns in South Asia by announcing its India and Pakistan Wilayats (provinces) with a focus on Kashmir ([Economic Times](#), May 12; [The Nation](#), May 17). Another plausible explanation about the timing of Zawahiri's message is to give credence and support to AGH's jihadist campaign in Kashmir following the major setbacks that the deaths of Zakir Musa and AGH spokesman Shabir Ahmad Malik, a.k.a. Abu Ubaidah, represent ([Daily Excelsior](#), May 24; [Rising Kashmir](#), June 26).

Al-Qaeda's Kashmir-centric propaganda, however, is not new. In the past, al-Qaeda's leadership has made several audio-visual exhortations citing the suffering of Kashmiris and inciting violence against the Indian establishment, including the government and security forces. Though not very prominently figured earlier, Kashmir remained a reference point for most of al-Qaeda's propaganda materials concerning South Asia. For example, Ayman al-Zawahiri's April 2006 video message praised the jihadist movements fighting against India in Jammu and Kashmir. Most recently, al-Qaeda's as-Sahab Media Foundation released an Urdu-language Nasheed (Islamic chants) titled "Kashmir Lost But Not Forgotten" on December 29, 2017. [2] The seven-minute-long jihadist chant featured clips of Kashmir, India, and Pakistan's political leadership, military drills, and visuals from Burhan Wani's funeral procession. Wani was closely associated with AGH's slain leader Zakir Musa under Hizbul Mujahideen's banner and had virtually inspired a new breed of militants in Kashmir even after his death in early July 2016.

Though nothing is novel in the latest message for Kashmir, core al-Qaeda and AQIS made similar appeals in previous messages. The July 9 message from Zawahiri is in tandem with AQIS' 'code of conduct' (CoC) document released in June 2017 that elaborated long-term objectives and its strategy for jihad. This 20-page document also had several references to Kashmir, hinting at expanding operations in the valley ([Jihadology.net](#), June 24, 2017).

Al-Qaeda's chief reiterated the concept of a single Ummah, and the on-going jihad as 'one jihad.' He vehemently criticized Pakistan for being complicit with the United States in persecuting the Taliban and other jihadists operating in the region, primarily in Afghanistan. He blamed Pakistan's intelligence agencies for sharing information about ground locations and the movements of militants, and for providing logistical support for U.S. intelligence in the region for monetary benefits. He termed the Pakistani government and its armed forces as "the toadies of America," which is only interested in amassing ill-gotten wealth. According to Zawahiri, the United States and Pakistan relationship is an "alliance of thieves," and stated that the Pakistani government or its army should not be trusted in the fight for Kashmir's liberation. Zawahiri exhorted Kashmiri youths to partake in al-Qaeda's brand of jihad. According to Zawahiri, Muslims in Kashmir are trapped between "Hindu brutality" and the "treachery and conspiracies" of Pakistan's intelligence establishments. For Zawahiri, Kashmir is a "bleeding wound" in every Muslim's heart and any aggression against

Kashmir is aggression against the entire Muslim Ummah and vice versa. Trying to bring greater legitimacy to its brand of jihad, he implores Muslim clerics of the world to preach that jihad in Kashmir is an "obligation" upon every Muslim. He said, "We are a single, united Ummah; geographic boundaries or national differences cannot divide us" ([Jihadology](#), July 9).

Similar to the instructions depicted in the CoC, Zawahiri reiterated his call for attacks on the Indian military. He advised jihadists in Kashmir to focus their attacks on India with "unrelenting blows," and on the Indian government and armed forces by inflicting financial losses. Unlike his "Don't Forget Kashmir" speech, the CoC document singled out Indian military officers as targets because their actions resulted in the deaths of Kashmiris (both militants and civilians). Similar to the CoC, Zawahiri's July 9 speech cautioned against jihadist operations targeting Muslim civilians and not to "violate the sanctities of Muslims." He urged al-Qaeda's followers not to target mosques, markets, and gathering places of Muslims. However, he lamented the existence of deviants in the ranks doing un-Islamic practices such as "kidnapping for ransom and blackmailing," due to the lack of a strict adherence to Sharia guidelines.

Indeed, the longstanding cross-border terrorism in India's state of Jammu and Kashmir has witnessed a steady shift with the increasing traction of 'Sharia

or Shahadat' (Implementation of Islamic Sharia Law or Martyrdom), the jihadist catchphrase coined by Zakir Musa and popular among extremist elements, which is fast replacing the age old 'pro-Pakistan' separatist clamour ([Kashmir Observer](#), May 15, 2017). This transformation has gathered momentum in the last few years, especially with growing outreach of transnational jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and IS, which have entered the Kashmir theatre by enticing the disgruntled local militants to reinvigorate the enduring Kashmir conflict. Although al-Qaeda's grip on the Kashmir affair is still in its nascent stage, over time, its ideology of pro-Islamic Sharia and Caliphate is continuing to gain grassroots support from alienated and radicalized Kashmiri youths.

*Animesh Roul is the executive director of the New Delhi-based policy research group Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict. He specializes in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, and armed conflict and violence in South Asia.*

## Notes

[1] The al-Qaeda video is presently available on YouTube, See, "Don't Forget Kashmir", Al Qaeda chief threatens Indian Army, J&K govt in new video", *IBTimes India*, July 10, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6\\_IRdrj62Tc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_IRdrj62Tc)

[2] "AQIS Releases Video for Urdu Chant Promoting Cause of Kashmiris, Inciting Against India", SITE Intelligence, January 2, 2018, [http://sitemultimedia.org/video/SITE\\_AQIS\\_Kashmir\\_Lost\\_Not\\_Forgotten.mp4](http://sitemultimedia.org/video/SITE_AQIS_Kashmir_Lost_Not_Forgotten.mp4)

# Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: The Easter Bombings and Beyond

*Christopher Smith*

The series of tragic bombings across Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday has placed the island-nation at the forefront of concern regarding a possible new Islamic State (IS) operation in South Asia. The exact nature and direction of this dynamic is not yet clear and may still be unfolding. However, it should now be seen as very much a component part of the overall security landscape in Sri Lanka, an understanding of which points to a disturbing convolution of interlocking religious and ethnic enmities that do not bode well for the future. [1]

The Sri Lankan civil war ended in the East in 2007 and the North in 2009 and on both fronts the LTTE was comprehensively defeated. In the decade or more that has past, the Tamil communities have not fared well. The North is a virtual police state, and the security forces have developed an institutional obsession over LTTE remnants and possible resurgence, which has not yet materialized and probably will not. The province is on lock-down, militarized, and under the tightest and most insidious system of surveillance, which reaches down to the village level. The slightest sign of activity leads to disproportionate responses with scant regard for human rights and civil liberties. In parallel, the Buddhist clergy and the Department of Archaeology roam the region looking for Hindu shrines to replace with Buddhist equivalents and streets to rename. Reminders of which side won the war, in the form of military monuments, also dot the countryside. Whole communities are showing signs of malaise—alcohol and drug use are on the rise, along with chronic youth unemployment, a surge in violent, semi-organized crime, sexual violence and rampant corruption. Almost everybody wants to move 'outside.'

In the East, there is a different, but no more positive, post-war outcome for the Tamils. Here, Muslim communities have been allowed, even encouraged, by the state to prosper at the direct expense of Tamils; the desire for retribution runs deep. Muslims have taken over key political and administrative posts and have ensured that state resources are unevenly distributed in their favour—local government, development, education all lack any

form of ethnic balance. Ampara and Batticaloa—the two main cities in the East—are visibly thriving, but only for the Muslims. In the East, Tamils lack the financial resources and the social networks necessary to migrate to the West. Instead, they find unsatisfactory employment contracts largely in the Middle East, again controlled by Muslim traders.

While the Muslim communities in the East enjoy a benign environment, the situation in Colombo and further afield has been marred but not destroyed by communal violence. In early-2018, a State of Emergency was imposed after serious violence erupted in Ampara and in the Central Province city of Kandy between Muslim and Sinhalese mobs ([First Post](#), March 7, 2018). The Easter Sunday bombings have since severely compromised this hitherto reasonably comfortable position in the East of the country. The Tamils have not fought back, in any noticeable way, against an economic takeover by the Muslims and the state has encouraged and abetted this discrimination—the key political sentiment would seem to be the perceived need for ongoing retribution against Tamils. This may have overlooked the possibility of a Sinhalese backlash over the medium-term but nothing prepared any of these communities for what was to come after the Easter attacks. Mosques have been stormed and Qurans defaced and defiled. Muslim's shops have been attacked and factories destroyed by fire. Allegedly, the police have looked on and offered little if any protection—rule of law remains unacceptably weak. Muslims have been harassed on public transport. Sinhalese hate groups have commandeered social media and “fake news” abounds. Under new anti-terror legislation, Muslims have been detained for the possession of the Quran, Arabic literature, knives, toy guns, and even camouflage clothing. A Muslim woman wearing a dress with a motif depicting a ship's helm was rounded on and accused of mocking Buddhism for wearing an image of the wheel of dharma; the victim was later charged under a hate speech law that prohibits insulting religions with the “malicious intention of outraging religious feelings” and she faces a two year custodial prison sentence and has so far spent over two weeks behind bars ([al-Jazeera](#), June 16). A Muslim doctor has been accused of secretly sterilizing 4,000 non-Muslim women. Parents have blocked access to their school for Muslim teachers. Lawyers have refused to represent Muslims.

The overall performance of the government has been woeful. The president was thought to have been warned

on several separate occasions of the impending attacks, together with detailed accounts of when, where, and how. His response has been to sack several key figures from the security forces even though their warnings may have been commensurate with the scale of the threat, and accurate as well ([al-Jazeera](#), June 8). The government overall has descended into a somewhat puerile logjam focused upon enmity between the president and prime minister, both from opposing sides of the political divide, and without a degree of mature cohabitation, governance has proven difficult. Most recently, the president has chosen to blame the bombings on international drug syndicates, presumably to coincide with his efforts to reintroduce capital punishment for drug trafficking, which has been subject to a moratorium since 1976 ([Channel News Asia](#), July 15).

Rule of law and governance are, however, exactly what the country needs to steer itself through this turbulent period. Sri Lanka has precious little of either and the opportunities for reconciliation and transitional justice have passed—the communal damage is now permanent. Presidential and parliamentary elections are on the horizon and recent events have surely paved the way for a return of the Rajapaksa clan, whose boorish methods may not be appreciated but, as so many now recognize, they achieve traction even if human rights and civil liberties are the major casualties. The downward trend of electoral violence may certainly be reversed.

Recent events have also been catastrophic for the economy. Indebtedness, primarily to China for Mahinda Rajapaksa's vanity projects, has exposed the economy to debt renegotiation from weakness. The \$4.4 billion a year tourist industry has been decimated; prior to Easter Sunday Sri Lanka was considered the world's number one tourist destination, but now planes and hotels are almost empty. Also, because the bombers deliberately targeted foreigners, foreign investment will surely suffer.

The Trump Administration has been largely quiet on recent developments in Sri Lanka. However, in addition to an unquantifiable threat from extremist Islam, the Chinese belt and road programme looks set for further success in Sri Lanka, and more so when the Rajapaksa clan eventually returns. This, in turn, will further worry the Indian government as will the possibility that IS has opened up a new front designed to target southern India. The amount of threats emerging from Sri Lanka's political and security landscape should now be enough to draw the collective attention any global power.

## Notes

[1] The information for this article was largely gathered during a research visit to Colombo, the Northern and Eastern Provinces in March 2019.

# A Shia “Boko Haram” Insurgency or Iranian Proxy in Nigeria? Not So Fast

*Jacob Zenn*

On July 29, the Kaduna High Court is expected to rule on whether Nigerian Shia leader, Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, will be allowed to leave Nigeria to receive medical treatment ([Leadership](#), July 18). In 2015, al-Zakzaky was severely injured during a crackdown by the Nigerian security forces on his movement, called the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), which led to the deaths of a reported 300 IMN members ([hrw.org](#), December 22, 2015). That crackdown was purportedly precipitated by al-Zakzaky’s followers’ blocking roads and preventing Nigerian army officials from passing through areas in Zaria, Kaduna State, where al-Zakzaky’s headquarters is based. Since 2015, al-Zakzaky has been receiving inadequate medical care for his injuries while in the custody of the Nigerian army.

The 2015 crackdown came amid the rise of Sunni-Shia tensions globally. In Nigeria, 2014, al-Zakzaky was accused of “dividing Muslims.” Al-Zakzaky, however, accused his accuser, prominent Saudi-based Nigerian cleric Ahmad Gumi, of “working for Israel” and plotting al-Zakzaky’s assassination with U.S. and Israeli backing ([Vanguard](#), December 11, 2014). One year prior to the major 2015 crackdown, in July 2014, three of al-Zakzaky’s sons and nine other followers were also killed during a “Quds [Jerusalem] procession” in Zaria ([Vanguard](#), July 26, 2014). Thus, the 2015 crackdown was not without precedent.

IMN confrontations with the security forces resurfaced in October 2018 when several dozen of the group’s members were reported killed in Abuja while protesting and demanding al-Zakzaky’s release from his seemingly indefinite detention. The *New York Times* subsequently released exclusive footage showing unarmed al-Zakzaky supporters being killed in those protests by Nigeria’s elite Presidential Guard Brigade ([Punch](#), December 18, 2018). This year, in early July, protests recommenced as al-Zakzaky’s supporters have become concerned that he may die in detention ([Vanguard](#), July 12). Again, the security forces responded to agitation with lethal force on several protesters, who themselves were accused of killing a security officer. The latest confrontation was on

July 22 when several al-Zakzaky supporters were killed in another protest in Abuja ([Vanguard, July 22](#)).

This series of events has led international and Nigerian media to suggest there may be a Shia rebellion or “new Boko Haram” in Nigeria if al-Zakzaky is not released or if pressure continues to mount on his Shia followers ([Al-Jazeera](#), April 22). Nigerian officials meanwhile label the IMN an “insurgent group” ([Vanguard](#), December 6, 2016). However, the IMN is not like Iranian proxies or other Shia militias in the Middle East, and it does not resemble Boko Haram during the period when it prepared for jihad in the aftermath of a similar government crackdown that killed at least 200 of its members 10 years ago in July 2009 ([dni.gov](#), January 19, 2017). This article argues al-Zakzaky’s Shias followers will continue to protest and be further suppressed but will not engage in a large-scale violent uprising. Contrarily, they will become more “useful” to Iran as a symbol of global Shia victimhood.

### **Al-Zakzaky: An Imperfect Iranian Ally**

Ibrahim al-Zakzaky became best known during his student years in the 1970s as a Muslim Brotherhood-influenced student leader demanding sharia law replace the Nigerian Constitution. After the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, however, he was among the many northern Nigerian Muslims becoming interested in Iran as a model for the change Nigeria needed and even visited Iran to witness the Islamic Republic. [1] Many other Nigerian Muslims who initially sought to emulate the Iranian Islamic Revolution in Nigeria drifted away from Tehran’s ideological influence either because they received Saudi or Kuwaiti funding and remained in the Sunni-Salafi fold, or they became disillusioned by Iran because of its foreign policy—including supporting Hafez al-Assad during his violent suppression of a 1982 Muslim Brotherhood revolt in Hama, Syria.[2] However, al-Zakzaky remained committed to Iran throughout the 1980s and emerged as its most prominent supporter by the turn of the 1990s.

Knowing Iran could not become a global Islamic power if it relied on projecting a “Shia” identity, in the 1980s Ayatollah Khomeini instead portrayed Iran as an “Islamic” power. One prominent Nigerian cleric who visited Iran after the Islamic Revolution, for example, recalled hearing the chant, “*La Shia La Sunni-ya, Thura, Thura Islamiya (No Shia, No Sunni, Revolution, Islamic Revolution)*” ([Youtube](#), May 21, 2016). In a religious landscape where few Nigerian Muslims were Shia before 1979

(there are now around three-million Nigerian Shias), al-Zakzaky, too, adopted a slogan avoiding a “Shia” identity and instead promoted an identity of “Islam only”, which his movement continues to endorse ([ihrc.org.uk](#), December 21, 2015). However, when al-Zakzaky became more pronounced about his Shiism in 1994, a number of his followers branched off and refused to become Shia. One follower who split from al-Zakzaky at this time was Muhammed Yusuf, who was then around 25-years-old and later co-founded Boko Haram in 2002-2003, but under Salafi influence ([aymennjawad.org](#), August 5, 2018).

Beyond that schism, al-Zakzaky also lost Iranian favor due to the rise of factions among the Nigerian Shias themselves. One Shia group, for example, considered itself more theologically learned than the “activist” al-Zakzaky, and claimed greater support from Iranian ayatollahs than al-Zakzaky. [2] Moreover, another Shia group under Iranian management avoided al-Zakzaky’s politically antagonizing activism. This helped Iran maintain more amicable relations with Nigeria than it would if it was seen as sponsoring al-Zakzaky’s delegitimization of the Nigerian state. [3]

Al-Zakzaky himself also eventually accepted there would be no such “Islamic Revolution” in Nigeria and instead began advocating for “Islamic Evolution” and even accepted his followers’ participation in the Nigerian civil service. Despite maintaining a lightly armed “Hizbollah-like” guard corps, a newspaper, and pro-Khomeini and pro-Ayatollah Khomeini imagery on the IMN website and at demonstrations, the IMN has more recently settled for highly public, and even ostentatious, Shia rituals as its hallmark, as opposed to direct political agitation ([islamicmovement.org](#), July 11). However, this is a far cry from the violence for which Boko Haram has become notorious.

### **A Shia “Boko Haram”?**

When the Nigerian government cracked down on Boko Haram in July 2009, late Muhammed Yusuf’s supporters then met with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and received weapons, financing, training, and advising ([aymennjawad.org](#), September 15, 2018). Although Yusuf’s successor, Abubakar Shekau, ignored AQIM’s advice, which ended up leading to the end of AQIM’s support for Boko Haram, the relationship still helped Boko Haram launch its insurgency in 2010. However, even if al-Zakzaky’s followers wanted to wage an insur-

gency, Iran has few regional assets in West Africa to support the IMN like AQIM had to support Boko Haram.

The situation in Nigeria is much different than the Middle East, where Iran is geographically proximate to Shia militias it supports, such as in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Moreover, the record of Iranian and Hizbollah-backed terrorist cells in countries outside of the Middle East, like Thailand, Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria itself suggests they are more inept when backing cells outside of the Middle East ([Vanguard](#), January 19, 2011; ; [Kampalapo](#), July 23). This is perhaps due to Iran and Hizbollah's weaker cultural knowledge of those countries, stronger Israeli counter-intelligence outside of the Middle East compared to that region, and Iran's placement of more elite operatives in Middle Eastern countries than outside of the region.

Beyond the obvious fact that al-Zakzaky's Shia political agitation bears little resemblance to Boko Haram's Jihadi-Salafism, al-Zakzaky has also not called for violence in response to the clashes with the Nigerian state from his detention. This does not mean all al-Zakzaky followers will abstain from violence. However, there does not appear to be any organized insurgency in the works by al-Zakzaky's followers. Even if Iran wanted to back a proxy militia in Nigeria, the geographic and cultural distance would hinder it. In addition, Iran is overstretched in Middle Eastern conflicts and has less commitment to al-Zakzaky than it may appear on the surface, especially given the other Nigerian Shia factions.

### **Nigeria's Next Move**

One possibility is rather than allowing al-Zakzaky to become a "martyr" and a further stain on Nigeria's human rights record if he dies in Nigerian custody, Nigeria will allow him to travel abroad to receive medical treatment. Iran has offered to provide care for him ([Punch](#), July 26). However, there is a chance Nigeria, which accuses al-Zakzaky and his wife of being accomplices to murder, would presumably not allow him back into Nigeria ([Punch](#), April 27, 2018). Al-Zakzaky would therefore live in exile in Iran or other countries whose governments and Muslim organizations have courted al-Zakzaky's family members, especially his daughters, such as Lebanon and Turkey ([YouTube](#), June 2, 2018; [YouTube](#), March 11, 2018). By portraying Nigeria's government as in league with *Wahhabis* or *takfiris* in oppressing Shias like al-Zakzaky, Iran will also be able to further its narrative of global Shia victimhood.

Nigeria, therefore, is a case where Iran might paradoxically benefit more from further oppression of the IMN, rather than directly using proxy militias to obtain political power as it does in Iraq, Lebanon or Yemen. The Nigerian government also shows no sign of leniency towards the IMN beyond possibly sending al-Zakzaky into exile. With Nigerian Sunni-Salafi clerics reticent to either comment on the al-Zakzaky affair or assertively call for an end to the violence, it appears there is no way out but for more IMN public protests and more Nigerian government crackdowns on the IMN creating more "martyrs" from among Nigeria's Shias. However, Iran may be the ultimate "winner" from this situation.

*Jacob Zenn is a senior fellow at The Jamestown Foundation and adjunct assistant professor at Georgetown University. Follow @BokoWatch*

### **Notes**

[1] Ramzi Ben Amara, "6 'We Introduced shari'a'—The Izala Movement in Nigeria as Initiator of shari'a-reimplementation in the North of the Country: Some Reflections." In John A. Chesworth, Franz Kogelmann, *Shari'a in Africa Today: Reactions and Responses* (Brill, 21 November 2013), 142.

[2] Kane, Ousmane, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria*, pg. 78 (Brill, 2003)

[3] Sani Yakubu Adam and Kabiru Haruna Isa, "A History of Shia and its Development in Nigeria: The Case-Study of Kano," *Journal for Islamic Studies*, Vol. 36, 2017, 226-256.

[4] Ibid.