



SAR Consultancy (Security Analysis and Research)

Special Bulletin – Potential Impact of Boko Harams’ pledge of allegiance to ISIS



On the 7th of March 2015, an audio clip was released to the media proclaiming to be the voice of Shekau or someone purporting to be Shekau, the self-proclaimed leader of Boko Haram, in which he offered a pledge of allegiance to ISIS. While this was not surprising to most analysts, the exact motivation behind the pledge, the authenticity of it and the possible impact of such a pledge have been widely discussed since.

Boko Haram allegiance to ISIS – The potential Impact

As media reports broke of Boko Haram proclaiming allegiance to ISIS, speculation as to the impact of such an allegiance would have on the insurgency in Nigeria became rife. This brief account attempts to summarise the main arguments surrounding potential impact and examines the justification of each. Given that the information available at this stage is somewhat limited and largely based on conjecture, the information reviewed will be used to formulate three possible scenarios resulting from this alleged alliance. This is deemed to be the most feasible approach until more evidence of a committed relationship becomes evident.

Since the announcement two common commentary approaches have ensued. The first suggests that the announcement is a symbolic act with any impact unlikely. Others have elaborated on this suggesting that it is an act of desperation, given the increased military offensive by Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad. The alternative argument given has been that it is an indication of Boko Harams’ desire to become an international jihadi organisation, whilst also providing ISIS with the opportunity to spread its caliphate to West Africa. However, like most issues viewed under a binary lens, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

Indicators to support growing allegiance between Boko Haram and ISIS

Shekau declared a caliphate in North East Nigeria in October 2014.

ISIS reference support from a Nigeria based group

Shekau was reported to have praised Al Baghdadi and the ISIS caliphate

Shekau was reported to have praised the Paris Attacks

Prior to ISIS, Shekau called on brethren to support his cause, but yet did not align publically with other groups

ISIS media monitors appear to be one of the first to retweet Boko Harams’ material and spread Boko Harams’ material very quickly

Significant improvements to video and media approach by Boko Haram

Similar trend in Nigeria mirroring trend in Libya in relation to ISIS.

Notwithstanding that both perspectives have some validity, the announcement has many other potential impacts. It has been argued by some analysts that the alliance will bring Boko Haram power, resources, prestige and extend its reach outside of Northern Nigeria, but do they want this, given that since the inception of Boko Haram they have been very much focused on Nigerian targets and issues? A more important question here that needs to be answered might be; what, if anything, has changed that may incite Boko Haram to look beyond Nigeria for support and/or an extended territory of influence? It may be credible to suggest that the increased military response by Nigeria and neighbouring countries, and support from other nations, has promoted Boko Haram to respond by joining forces. If this is correct, this argument may not necessarily be that they joined forces due to being on the back foot, rather it could be as a reaction to the provocation. Shekau has never been shy about making threats and conducted attacks if military responses have been intensified.

This may also raise the question; why would they have not done this before? The simple answer could be that they did not need too. Since inception they appear to have been driven by a Nigeria grievance for the most part, however, given the recent rise in their international profile, since the kidnapping of the Chibok girls, they may have wanted to build on the momentum. To date, there has been suggestions and, some would argue, limited evidence that Boko Haram had links with Al Qaeda and Al Shabbab a number of years ago but, if links were present, these links appeared to have served, or at least less noticeable, over recent years. It would appear the desire was not there before to publically align to another group. Nonetheless, it has been argued by a small number of analysts that Boko Harams pledge to ISIS over Al Qaeda may be seen as a coup for ISIS. However, others could argue the opposite that Al Qaeda disowned both groups given their acceptance of what would appear to be disproportionate violence and brutality of attacks.

This perceived desire for brutality along with a perceived convergence of modus operandi between Boko Haram and ISIS has also been highlighted as factor likely to attract both groups. Comparisons have become more prominent in many analytical reports referring to the two groups of late. However, it could be justifiable to argue that many of the tactics used by Boko Haram that are similar to ISIS predate ISIS and therefore cannot be used to allege copycat actions by Boko Haram. That being said, the media coverage of these events by Boko Haram have been far less impressive than ISIS. Interestingly, this appears to have improved significantly over recent months in respect to Boko Harams' videos, optics, graphics and style, which seem slicker, and more similar to those released by ISIS. This has been highlighted as evidence of growing links between both groups. Interestingly, the same thing has been said about video footage of incidents in Libya, where allegiance has been given by a Libyan jihadist group and the presence of ISIS is now accepted. In addition, the recent creation of Boko Harams' media and twitter account appear to signify to many a shift in approach. This is of interest not only in respect to the possible links to ISIS that it could signify, but it could also illustrate a shift in the focus of the group, who to date many analysts have argued, have lacked a central command and a group without a clear direction.

Given that this alleged allegiance is not only happening between Boko Haram and ISIS, and given that other allegiances appear to be developing from rhetoric to action, it is of benefit to look at possible similarities between such contexts. It has been purported by many that weak governance and

instability assist in the establishment of jihadi groups. This has been one of the key factors presented for ISIS flourishing in Iraq, Syria, and more recently Libya. However, there are other similar factors that may make Nigeria look attractive. Factors noted by ISIS in Dabiq (ISIS Magazine) including, the ongoing insurgency, the ease of access to enter Nigeria, the often limited military response, etc. many contribute to this. Furthermore, like Iraq and Syria, Nigeria has many underlying social, economic, religious and political grievances that could potentially be viewed as potential leverage for support for ISIS. However, given the pattern of the insurgency to date in Nigeria, this may be most relevant to the North East.

If legitimate, what is in it for ISIS?

- Gives increased publicity
- Greater coverage for the group
- Extended reach into West Africa with an established group
- Expansion of the caliphate
- Perceived coup over Al Qaeda.

What is in it for Boko Haram?

- Provides an international dimension to their cause, if desired
- Support for Boko Haram as military advances reportedly increase
- Funding, man power, expertise. However, it would be difficult to transport assets or people between Iraq and Syria, and Nigeria. It may be easier to exchange funds and moral support. However, it would be easier to exchange manpower and assets between Libya and Nigeria, which may transit in either or both directions.
- Ability to cash in on notoriety of ISIS to gain greater support from foreign fighters

ISIS reference to Nigeria in Dabiq magazine

It would appear that ISIS are monitoring Nigeria from references in the Dabiq magazine, with specific reference to Nigeria in 4 of the 7 issues.

Issue 1 references Nigeria, amongst other countries like Yemen, Mali, Somalia, Sinai, Libya, etc. and parts of Tunisia, Algeria, Indonesia and Philippines as lands which have favourable conditions to support jihad.

Issue 4 references slavery referring to the enslavement of Christian women and children in the Philippines and Nigeria by 'mujahidin'.

Issue 5 references Nigeria in the context of the announcement of the caliphate, saying that prior to this announcement 'a number of groups in Khurasan, al-Qawqaz, Indonesia, Nigeria, the Philippines, and elsewhere have pleaded their allegiance to the Khalifah'. It was also noted that ISIS had accepted their bay'at or pledge but also said that they delayed their announcement of each particular group, suggesting that some were bigger than others. It was then said 'this delay should end with either the appointment or recognition of leadership by the Khalifah for those lands'.

Issue 6 referenced Nigeria, but on this occasion it referenced it in the context of the oil industry. ISIS noted that they had disrupted the oil supply in Iraq and Libya and stated that in Nigeria this had been achieved by mujahidin there. This it argued was a way of targeting Americans.

It has been argued that ISIS will have to formally accept the pledge, but the reference in issue 5 Dabiq may indicate that the acceptance has already been given and the announcement by Shekau was just a formality.

Possible Scenarios

Given that much of the opinions or analysis on the future impact of the alleged pledge of allegiance are based on conjecture, forecasting what may come next is extremely difficult. As a result, scenario building is probably the best means of forecasting. If one assumes the pledge purported to be from Shekau, the self-proclaimed leader of Boko Haram, is authentic the possible scenarios are possible:

Best scenario:

The pledge of allegiance by Boko Haram to ISIS is a symbolic call and propaganda in an attempt to increase the notoriety of Boko Haram internationally. If this is the case, limited if any response from ISIS is likely and little or no impact in real terms will be seen.

Likely scenario:

The pledge of allegiance by Boko Haram to ISIS, if Boko Haram do not want to change their approach from national to international, is likely to change little technically on the ground. There may be movement of expertise, finances and technical support between groups, alongside praise and support for operations conducted. That being said, if Boko Haram are willing to shift their approach, the next scenario below cannot be ruled out. Only time will tell if such a shift is on the cards, but indicators should be monitored closely, especially given the shift in Libya over recent months. A split in Boko Haram should not be ruled out either, and if this was to happen, or a shift to an international focus, the next scenario is likely.

Worst case scenario:

The pledge of allegiance by Boko Haram to ISIS is a firm commitment between both parties, signifying immediate risk of both groups collaborating to attack high profile targets, most likely international targets in Nigeria. If this occurs this could mark a shift from Boko Harams' domestic approach to a more international one. If this is so, this could influence a number of things. Firstly, it could motivate African diaspora in Europe vulnerable to radicalisation to better identify with ISIS's call to jihad, thereby inciting people to commit acts of terror in Europe or abroad under the name of Boko Haram and/or ISIS. In addition, as Nigeria is easier to access than Syria and Iraq at present, it may incite willing fighters to go to Nigeria to participate in the ongoing insurgency. Either way, it is likely that Boko Haram will have to demonstrate to ISIS their commitment and display their shift to international targets. This shift may be seen in changes to targets, locations or magnitude. This may result in greater risks associated with places like Kano, Kaduna, Abuja, Lagos and the Niger Delta region (less likely). Targets may shift from national targets to hotels housing internationals, embassies, international clubs, oil fields (less likely), international engineering projects, etc. Given ISIS attacks on oil fields in Iraq, and more recently in Libya, some may think Boko Haram may try to replicate this approach in Nigeria. Given the distance between the North East and the oil rich regions of in the Niger Delta, and ISIS recognition of the group's active within these regions, the opportunity or desire to attack may be limited.

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