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in Security Culture,
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Kommentare (0)

Islamic State and Boko Haram: A burgeoning partnership?

By Yan St-Pierre

Part VI of our [series](#) on ISIS

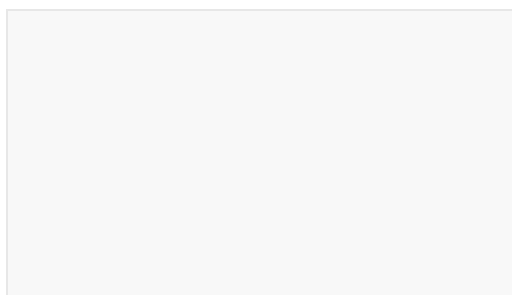
In 2014, two insurgency organisations stood out by their expansion, success and brutality: The Islamic State (IS) and Boko Haram (BH). The former emerged from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq and became a major actor in the Middle East, its influence reaching beyond the borders of its self-proclaimed “caliphate”, while the latter spread its violence throughout north-eastern Nigeria, spilling over into Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Because of their still growing success, **many wonder about a possible partnership between IS and BH. To this I answer that there is a connection, but no partnership. Currently, any evidence suggesting a partnership is circumstantial at best.**

1. Which indicators suggest a partnership?

There are three publicly known indicators that suggest a collaboration between IS and BH. First, BH’s alleged leader, **Abubakar Shekau, praised IS for its success** in various videos released since July 2014. However, in none of these did Shekau pledge allegiance to the Islamic State, actually going as far as to declare his own “caliphate”. Therefore, this cannot be interpreted as a declaration of partnership.

Second, the allusion to “Nigerian pledges” in the **November issue of IS’ magazine Dabiq** has prompted many analysts to infer a collaboration between both organisations. While this reference by the IS can indeed be understood as a nod to talks with BH, it may also refer to factions within the group, offshoots like Ansaru or Harakatul-Muhajiriin or other local radical actors. To infer a link between IS and BH based on this vague reference is problematic.

Third, the recent set-up of BH’s media outlet Urwah al-Wuthqa and an “official” Twitter account has also prompted analysts to **suggest that IS may have had a hand in BH’s new public relations strategy**. However, the evidence – e.g. image quality and sound – remains circumstantial at best and can also suggest that Boko Haram emulated, but did not follow advice or obtained logistical or operational support. Again, this is very weak evidence for the alleged partnership.



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2. How the organisations' structures blur their relationship

It is important to understand that BH is anything but a homogeneous organisation. It has a core which gravitates around Abubakar Shekau and is complemented by diverse factions with fluctuating loyalties and various groups of local criminals. BH's strategists use the latter as cannon fodder for many of its operations. It is this highly fluid structure that creates much confusion on how BH operates and what kind of relationships it develops. Because anyone **can use the name of Boko Haram – without necessarily having the approval from the core –** this creates situations like the **failed cease-fire negotiations in October 2014. The faction speaking in the name of BH at the time was not representing the core. The same questions arise in relation to BH's new media outlet.**

Similar issues can be observed within IS, which is spreading transnationally, with numerous groups pledging allegiance and "colonies" being established. As with BH's factions, these groups enjoy autonomy that allows them to begin discussions with other groups and factions, some of them being linked to BH. However, while the various factions of both organisations may engage in common activities, such as smuggling and trafficking, this does not mean that the core of each organisation is involved in said activities and this does not constitute evidence of a partnership.

3. Does that mean there's no collaboration between the Islamic State and Boko Haram?

The only links observed so far are of financial and motivational nature. Financial because BH, by controlling the north-south and east-west axis of smuggling and trafficking routes in Central Africa, has made itself indispensable to conduct illegal business from the Sahel to the MENA region. Nigeria is the West-African hub for all forms of trafficking: Anything that is transferred to or from East Africa or the MENA region must go through routes and zones controlled by BH. Thus, a good portion of what IS buys or sells is "taxed" by BH, and this situation has forced business talks i.e. trafficking prices and payment of logistical and material support, between the two organisations.

The link is motivational due to both organisations' overlapping territorial ambitions. IS' goal is to establish a "caliphate" from Spain and West-Africa to China, but not south of Central Africa. BH's **territorial ambition is to re-establish the defunct Kanem-Bornu empire**, whose borders spread around Lake Chad into north-east Nigeria, east Niger, south-west Chad and north-west Cameroon. Information obtained by MOSECON's intelligence section suggests that deals may be in place which would allow for territorial division to occur along ethnic and tribal lines matching BH's territorial goals.

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BH is in the extremely advantageous position of doing business with whom it wants, as the business and logistical needs of jihadi organisations surpass any ideological differences or other animosities they may have. Additionally, BH's criminal success in the Lake Chad region gives it an independence that many other organisations lack. Therefore it is in the comfortable position to dictate its own terms in partnership negotiations.

To conclude, even though the current situation does not exclude any future formal partnership between the Islamic State and Boko Haram, suggesting that a partnership currently exists would be erroneous.



Yan St-Pierre's experience and training is in developing and implementing counter-terrorism policies at micro and macro levels, with a focus on how states can improve their security practices and policies by combining the contributions of the political, administrative and private sectors that have an interest in public safety and counter-terrorism. His thesis compared the counter-terrorism

approaches and cultures of France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States in order to determine if an approach that is more dismissive of human rights is more effective when fighting terrorism. He also focuses on the analysis of social unrest, radicalism and asymmetrical conflicts, where his experience as practitioner in conflict areas provides a well balanced perspective. Yan St-Pierre is a regular guest contributor on counter-terrorism for the BBC World Service, Radio Francais International and Voice of America among others. He regularly contributes to the **MOSECON-Blog**.

 Tags: **Boko Haram, Dabiq, iraq, IS, islamic state, Islamischer Staat, Jiahdism, Nigeria, syria, terrorism**

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