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The debate around the evolution of Boko Haram's connections to al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb

GIORGIA GENTILI¹

Executive

One of the characteristics of Saharan-Sahelian jihadism is its factionalism and the groups operating in the region establish frequently shifting relations of cooperation or competition making it difficult to understand alignments, alliances and rivalries. This paper tries to shed some light on the matter illustrating the different positions and arguments on the debate around the Boko Haram²-al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb connection and its evolution. It covers the period of time that goes from the emergence of the Nigerian terrorist group in 2009 to its declaration of an Islamic caliphate in northern Nigeria in August 2014 and the establishment of the first contacts with the Islamic State that led to its official allegiance with the Iraqi/Syrian group in March 2015. During the course of the years, there has been much speculation about Boko Haram's links to the al-Qa'ida network, in particular to its North African branch, al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb. Although the majority of the analysts, institutes of research and think-tanks agree on the existence of such a connection, different opinions persist on the time this link was established, its strength and its nature. This is due to the scarcity and the limited reliability of the available information, and also to the interests of the subjects.

The paper will illustrate the positions of different relevant subjects at the beginning of Boko Haram insurgence and their evolution during the course of the years, in conjunction with the evolution of the terrorist group and the main events that have influenced the conflict between the group and the armed forces of Nigeria and its neighbouring countries.

Between its emergence in 2009 and its allegiance to the Islamic State on 13 March 2015 and its consequent change of name in Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyyah, Boko Haram together with its splinter group Ansaru³ have killed more than 13.000⁴ people, making it the deadliest terrorist group in

¹ Giorgia Gentili holds a post-graduate second-level Master's degree in Peacekeeping and Security Studies (University of Roma Tre), a Master's degree in International Relations and Diplomatic Affairs (University of Bologna, Forlì) and a Bachelor's degree in Foreign Languages and Literatures (University of Bologna). She was an intern at United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime – Terrorism Prevention Branch – Office of Chief in Vienna from February to July 2015.

² Boko Haram original name is Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (جماعة لاهة عجمج), Group of the People of Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad.

³ Ansaru original name is Jamā'atu Anṣārīl Muslimīna fī Bilādis Sūdān (جماعة انصار المسلمين في بلاد السودان), Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in the Lands of the Blacks.

⁴ Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) – ACLED Version 6 (1997-2015) – All Africa file – Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. <http://www.acleddata.com/>

2014⁵. One of the elements that is believed to have contributed to the strengthening of the group is its connection to al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). This paper presents the different positions expressed by the main international institutes of research, think-tanks and analysts about the existence of links between Boko Haram and its splinter group Ansaru and AQIM. An extensive research in open sources resulted in finding that the majority of them agree that a relation between AQIM and Boko Haram existed and that its nature mainly involved the training of fighters, the exchange of weapons and funding. However, some differences emerged among the positions of the various subjects, for example, some distinguish between Boko Haram and Ansaru and affirm that only the latter has links to AQIM. Finally, some others express a more cautious stance or remain sceptical about the existence of such ties.

Keywords

Boko Haram, AQIM, al-Qaeda, links, connection, ties

1. Positions in favour of the existence of a relation between Boko Haram and AQIM

Jacob Zenn, an analyst of African and Eurasian Affairs for The Jamestown Foundation and expert on Boko Haram, provides one of the most complete, in-depth analysis of the evolution of the groups' relations with al-Qa'ida. From its work, it emerges that links between Boko Haram and al-Qa'ida pre-dated 2009, the year Shekau took control of the group after Yusuf death and Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād, aka Boko Haram, was born. Soon after the first confrontations between the group, then called Ahl-Sunna wal Jamma (Companions of the Prophet⁶) and the Nigerian security forces in 2003-2004, its leader Muhammad Yusuf sent dozens of its followers to Algeria and Mauritania to train with GSPC⁷ in order to "gain the strength to succeed"⁸ in jihad in Nigeria⁹. Following the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf in July 2009 by the security forces, after a five-day clash in Borno that caused the

data/version-6-data-1997-2015.

⁵ Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) – *Global Terrorism Index Report 2015* – Institute for Economics & Peace. <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2015-Global-Terrorism-Index-Report.pdf>.

⁶ Locally the group was known also as the "Nigerian Taliban" or "Yusufiya" (Zenn, Mar 2014).

⁷ From the joining of a majority of members of the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC) and elements from the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (MICG), AQIM was formed in 2007.

⁸ Guzurin Mujaahidai (Foundations of Jihad) in Zenn, Mar 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=VWCNdqwGU-M#t=2690.

⁹ Jacob Zenn (11 Mar 2014) – *Nigerian Al-Qaedaism*, in Fradkin, Haqqani, Brown, Mneimneh – *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology vol 16* – Hudson Institute.

death of more than 800 people, and Shekau assumed the leadership of the movement, more than 100 followers fled to Sahel and Somalia to train with al-Qa'ida to avenge Yusuf's death. Shekau guided the transition of the group into a more militant formation, starting the jihad that Yusuf only spoke about in his sermons¹⁰. On August 9, a statement by Boko Haram, a sort of manifesto, was made available to the newspaper Vanguard, in which the group presented itself as "just a version of the Al Qaeda which we align with and respect. We support Osama bin Laden, we shall carry out his command in Nigeria until the country is totally Islamised which is according to the wish of Allah"¹¹. Moreover, it contained the declaration of the beginning of jihad in the country with a series of bombing in several cities¹². "Whereas Yusuf praised Osama bin Laden and al-Qa'eda and followed the history of Algerian jihadists, Shekau overtly reached out to al-Qa'eda"¹³. In April 2010, Shekau gave an interview to a Nigerian reporter, who had been blindfolded and driven to a hideout outside Maiduguri, in which he declared he had assumed the leadership of Boko Haram. In July, he released its first video statement. He addressed its message to "leaders of al-Qa'eda and its affiliated groups in Algeria, Iraq, Somalia and Yemen", offering "condolences on behalf of the mujahideen in Nigeria to the mujahideen in general, in particular to those in the Islamic State of Iraq, Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Yahya Al-Libi, Abu Abdullah Al-Muhajir, the Emir of the Islamic State in Somalia, the Emir of Al-Qa'eda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Emir of the Mujahideen in Pakistan, in Chechnya, Kashmir, Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula, and our religious clerics whom I did not mention"¹⁴. The condolences referred to the death of two al-Qa'ida in Iraq leaders Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, killed in April during a raid by Iraqi and U.S. security forces¹⁵. In addition, in its message, Shekau also extended Yusuf anti-Western position

¹⁰ Jacob Zenn (29 May 2014) – *Boko Haram and the kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls* – CTC Sentinel, vol 7 issue 5, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

¹¹ John Abayomi (14 Aug 2009) – *Boko Haram resurrects, declares total Jihad* – Vanguard. <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2009/08/boko-haram-ressurrects-declares-total-jihad/>

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Zenn (Mar 2014).

¹⁴ Zenn (Mar 2014); ICT's Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group Periodical Review – *August 2010* – International Institute for Counter-Terrorism.

¹⁵ "By Allah, they rose, did jihad, and fought in order for the faith to be entirely for Allah [...] It was for this that they rose, it was for this that they fought, and it was for this that they died. For that, he really was a master of the martyrs", in Wikileaks cable (15 Nov 2013) – *Nigeria sect leader lauds al-Qa'ida, threatens US* – Wikileaks. https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/51/5104943_re-africa-os-nigeria-ct-nigeria-sect-leader-lauds-al-qaida.html.

and threatened the United States: “Do not think jihad is over. Rather jihad has just begun. Oh America, die with your fury”¹⁶.

Moreover, on November 29, 2012, in a video published on Ana al-Muslim Network jihadist forum, Shekau wished “Glad Tidings, O Soldiers of Allah”, that the title of the video, on “the soldiers of the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State in Mali [...], our brothers and sheikhs in beloved Somalia [...] in Libya [...] in oppressed Afghanistan [...] in wounded Iraq [...] in Pakistan [...] in blessed Yemen [...] in usurped Palestine, and other places where our brothers are doing jihad in the Cause of Allah”. He added: “Nigeria and other crusaders, meaning America and Britain, should witness, and the Jews of Israel who are killing the Muslims in Palestine should witness ... that we are with our mujahideen brothers in the cause of Allah everywhere. [...] Do not think that jihad stops with the death of imams, because imams are individuals. [...] Don’t you see and think how many sheikhs and men were martyred, like Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, Abu Omar al Baghdadi, Osama bin Laden, Abu Yahya al Libi, Abu Yusuf Muhammad bin Yusuf al Nigiri [...] Did jihad stop? No. Jihad does not stop until Allah wills it to be stopped. [...] “We are with our mujahideen brothers in the Cause of Allah everywhere”¹⁷

As for AQIM, it had already expressed solidarity to Boko Haram in August 2009, offering “consolation and condolences” after the crackdown of the Nigerian security forces on the nascent group¹⁸. Then, it renewed its support in February 2010 and it offered its assistance to the Nigerian group: “We are ready to train your sons in weapons and to provide them with everything, with

¹⁶ Zenn (Mar 2014).

¹⁷ Bill Roggio (30 Nov 2012) – *Boko Haram emir praises al-Qaeda* – The Long War Journal; Tim Cocks (30 Nov 2012) – *Nigeria Boko Haram leader urges global jihad in video* – Reuters.com. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/11/boko_haram_emir_prai.php; <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-nigeria-bokoharam-idUKBRE8AT0S020121130>; Jacob Zenn (14 Jan 2013) – *Boko Haram’s international connections* – CTC Sentinel, vol 6 iss 1, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

¹⁸ “We followed with broken hearts the events of the massacre which befell our relatives and brothers in Nigeria over the past days, this barbaric crime and ugly revenge which was perpetrated against the rights of approximately 800 Muslims by wrecking their mosques, bombing their hospital, and tearing down their houses. The spiteful Christian army of Nigeria has been maiming and murdering Muslims well within eyesight and earshot of the world that is so proud of its human rights and its values of freedom and fake justice [...] the blood of Shaykh Mohamed Yusuf and his brothers won’t go away just like that. By the will of Allah, it will serve as a lantern to light the path for Muslims in Nigeria and as an inferno that will burn the cross worshippers and water the tree of Islam”, in Kohlmann (21 Aug 2009), *NEFA Foundation: AQIM Offers “Consolation and Condolences” to Nigerian Islamists* – Counterterrorism Blog. http://counterterrorismblog.org/2009/08/nefa_foundation_aqim_offers_co.php.

men and weapons, ammunition and equipment to enable them to defend our people in Nigeria and to retaliate the aggression of the crusaders minority. Send your sons to the field of military preparation and Jihad to raise up a fighting generation who will defend the blood and honour of the Muslims in Nigeria, and to stop the crusader campaign”¹⁹.

In addition to the reciprocal declarations of support and the moving of some Nigerian fighters to the north to train with AQIM, in support of his view Zenn affirms that the latter was moving south. According to him, between 2008 and 2010, AQIM shifted its main focus from Algeria to southern neighbouring countries, pursuing a strategy of expansion the Sahara/Sahel region. It gradually redirected its operations south, towards the Algerian Sahara, west towards Mauritania and the coastal area, and it was also spreading its activities across the Sahel into Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Chad²⁰. A decisive reason for this new strategic direction was the expressed will of extending guerrilla beyond the southern border by some of AQIM's regional commanders. AQIM, indeed, was becoming more and more decentralized, mostly because of rivalries among several emirs, who preferred to act independently commanding their own *katibat*²¹ (division) although remaining under the organization's umbrella. Zenn affirms that among them Mokhtar Belmokhtar emerged as a pivotal figure during this process, as described in details by Abdel Bari Atwan in its book “After bin Laden – Al-Qa’ida, the Next Generation” (2012). In 2007, Belmokhtar had left the command of AQIM's Zone 9 and had become leader of its own al-Mulathamun (“masked”) Battalion; later he became particularly active in Mali and Mauritania kidnapping Westerns and participating in smuggling and trafficking of arms and other goods. Progressively joined by some other southern commanders with their own *katibat* operating autonomously but as AQIM's groups, he gathered a

¹⁹ Christopher Anzalone (5 Feb 2010), *Genocide of the Muslim people in Nigeria – New episode of the ongoing crusade by AQIM* – Views from the Occident Blog; Asharq al-Awsat (2 Feb 2010) – *Al-Qaeda Offers to Arm and Train Nigerian Muslims* – Asharq al-Awsat; Wikileaks cable – *BBC Monitoring Alert – FRANCE* – Wikileaks. <http://occident2.blogspot.it/2010/02/english-translation-genocide-of-muslims.html>; <http://english.aawsat.com/2010/02/article55251957>; https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/81/812662_bbc-monitoring-alert-france-.html; Jacob Zenn (27 Mar 2013) – *Cooperation or competition: Boko Haram and Ansaru after the Mali intervention* – CTC Sentinel, vol 6 issue 3, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

²⁰ Magnus Taylor (23 Oct 2013) – *Expert interview: Jacob Zenn – On terrorism and insurgency in Northern Nigeria* – African Arguments. <http://africanarguments.org/2013/10/24/expert-interview-jacob-zenn-on-terrorism-and-insurgency-in-northern-nigeria>.

²¹ AQIM is thought to be organized into geographical zones, each of which has one or more operational battalions (*katibats*), which are further subdivided into several companies (*fassilas*). A *fassila* is made up of two “platoons” (*sarayas*), each with twelve to eighteen members, who may be further organized into smaller cells.

small army of Mauritians, Malians, Nigerians and Algerians and in 2010 AQIM announced the establishment of “the Islamic Emirate of Sahara” extending its area of influence from the Algerian Sahara to Mauritania, Mali, Libya, Niger, Nigeria and Chad. He saw the Sahel as a favourable environment where to find economic opportunities to finance its group and carry on its illegal activities, given the security challenges faced by the countries of the area, limited borders controls and populations somehow receptive to al-Qa’ida’s message, due to their social, economic, and political marginalization. Thanks to the links he had forged with local communities, including the Tuareg, and the criminal networks in the desert, AQIM was able to establish mobile training camps, in particular in northern Mali, allowing the group to train local recruits, with essential knowledge of the territory, from neighbouring countries and as far south as Nigeria²². Zenn’s position indicating AQIM and Boko Haram reaching out to each other fits within this context. He also adds that probably Nigeria’s oil wealth was the reason why Osama bin Laden was originally interested in the southern part of the country. He thinks that in the first place, al-Qa’ida’s aim was to attack the energy dependency and the interests of the United States, but it found it a difficult territory to operate in, possibly because it was a Christian majority area and it was very far from its main area of operations. AQIM, instead, was interested in Nigeria mainly for ideological reasons, in particular it saw it as a favourable environment to exploit Muslim/Christian violence. However, as explained in the next paragraph, some of Boko Haram characteristics, above all the fact that also Muslims could be targets if they disagreed with the group’s policies, something that could have affected al-Qa’ida’s reputation and support, made AQIM never recognize Boko Haram as one of its affiliates and prefer to maintain links with its splinter group Ansaru²³.

1.1 Key Boko Haram figures connected to AQIM and members of Ansaru’s future leadership

In 2011-2012, disagreements with AQIM’s leadership caused al-Qa’ida’s branch to lose control of some of its internal fighting groups. In late 2011, MUJAO²⁴ broke away from AQIM, mainly because of discriminations towards non-Algerians, in particular with regard to the promotion to leadership positions. It was led by the former GSPC recruiter of sub-Saharan Africans,

²² Sahara Tv (13 Sep 2013) – *How To End Boko Haram’s Terror: Jacob Zenn, The Jamestown Foundation* – Sahara Reporters. <http://saharareporters.tv/how-to-end-boko-harams-terror-jacob-zenn-the-jamestown-foundation>.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Jamā’at at-Tawhīd wal-Jihād fī Gharb ‘Afrīqqīyā, Mouvement pour l’Unité et le Jihad en Afrique d’Ouest (MUJAO) was composed mainly by Malian Arabs.

the Mauritanian Hamadou al-Khairu and Belmokhtar's relative, the Malian Oumarould Hamaha. In December 2012, after having been criticized by Droukdal in an exchange of letters containing reciprocal accusations, Belmokhtar, who was already operating independently since 2010 under the name al-Mulathamun ("The Veiled"), announced his detachment from AQIM taking his *katiba* with him and changing its name in al-Muwaqun Bi-Dima ("Those who Sign in Blood"). He remained loyal to al-Qa'ida's central leadership, but as some other groups led by former AQIM's commanders, he and its formation became part of the Emirate of Sahara, a loose ensemble of associated and rival groups, established by AQIM in 2010 to extend its area of influence from the Algerian desert to Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Libya, Mauritania and Chad. These groups' main activities included kidnapping for ransom of aid workers, diplomats, tourists and expatriate employees of multinational corporations and trafficking and smuggling of weapons and other licit and illicit goods. A similar process occurred within Boko Haram in 2012, when a group of fighters, the ones closer to AQIM, gathered under the name of Ansaru l-Muslimina fi Biladis as-Sudan ("Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in the Land of the Blacks" - Ansaru), split from the main group criticizing the indiscriminate violence and in particular the killing of Muslim civilians²⁵.

Between 2010 and 2011, Yusuf followers who had fled the country to train with AQIM returned to Nigeria and they established cells in north-western part of the country²⁶. Among them, there were Mamman Nur, Khalid al-Barnawi, Adam Kamar and Abu Muhammad, who would become key bridging figures between AQIM and Boko Haram and part of the leadership of Boko Haram's splinter group Ansaru. While Shekau was Yusuf's deputy, the Cameroonian Mamman Nur was his third in command and after Shekau was shot and detained during the July 2009 clashes, he temporarily became Boko Haram's leader. When Shekau was released from custody and took control of the group overpowering Nur, the latter fled to Somalia to train with al-Shabaab, a formation that would become an official al-Qa'ida affiliate in 2012. Nigerian Khalid al-Barnawi, fought with Belmokhtar in Algeria and Mauritania as early as 2005 and was his long-time kidnapping and smuggling accomplice, then he ran an AQIM training camp in the desert. Nigerian Abubakar Adam Kamar trained with AQIM in Algeria from 2009 to 2011, where he met al-Barnawi and became the chief of an AQIM training camp, then he settled in Kano. Abu Muhammed trained in Algeria under al-Barnawi, then he be-

²⁵ Aaron Zelin – *Boko Haram' Transitions to the Islamic State in West Africa with Jacob Zenn* – Jihadology Podcast, Jihadology.net and Pham (2011). <http://jihadology.net/2015/08/04/jihadology-podcast-boko-haram-transitions-to-the-islamic-state-in-west-africa-with-jacob-zenn>.

²⁶ Zenn (May 2014).

came Boko Haram's commander in Kaduna, in charge of north-central sector of Nigeria and head of the Shura Council that oversaw all the cells operating in the area²⁷.

As Zenn underlines, "these north-western cells, in contrast to Shekau's faction in Borno, specialized in sophisticated bombings that bore the hallmark of al-Qa`ida", even if all the attacks were still claimed by Boko Haram²⁸. Shekau's faction focused on carrying out assassinations, church and school arson attacks, prison breaks and mass assaults on government buildings that left many civilians dead including Muslim ones. The mentioned cells favoured the kidnapping of Western nationals, the bombing of churches, often on Christian festivities, the attacks on military convoys and facilities, and the assault of federal prisons.

According to Zenn, after returning to Nigeria, Mamman Nur masterminded the Federal Police Headquarters attack in Abuja on June 16, 2011, and the UN bombing on August 26, 2011 in Abuja. They were the first suicide bombings in Nigeria's history. Both the attacks were claimed by the same intermediary to Agence France-Presse and employed the same tactics. Nur coordinated the second attack from a base in Kano with two Nigerians who had trained with Kamar in Algeria²⁹, and a Nigerian militant, Habibu Bama³⁰. Bama was also involved in the first attack and in the Christmas Day 2011 church bombing at St. Theresa's Catholic Church at Madalla, together with Kabiru Sokoto, Boko Haram's commander of Sokoto State³¹. During

²⁷ Jacob Zenn (24 Feb 2014) – *Leadership analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria* – CTC Sentinel, vol 7 issue 2, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. About Abu Mohammed see also "Kabiru Sokoto Names Boko Haram's Leaders" – The Nation (14 Feb 2012) cited in Zenn (Feb 2014).

²⁸ Zenn (May 2014).

²⁹ Zenn adds that one of the two Algerian-trained operatives was Babagana Ismail Kwaljima (aka Abu Summaya), who was arrested while returning in Kano in 2007 on suspicion of plotting attacks against U.S. targets in Nigeria. Nigerian suspects who carried out the attack with Nur and the car used in the bombing were traced to the same district in Kano where AQIM-trained Nigerian militants, including Kamar, were arrested in 2007. Moreover, the UN attack occurred the same day that AQIM attacked a prestigious military academy in Algeria. (Zenn, Feb 2014).

³⁰ Jide Ajani and Okey Ndiribe (1 Sep 2011) – *UN House Blast: Mastermind, Nur, declared wanted* – Vanguard, cited in Zenn (Feb 2014). <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2011/09/un-house-blast-mastermind-nur-declared-wanted>.

³¹ Ikechukwu Nnochiri (21 Dec 2013) – *Catholic Church Bombing: Court sentences 'Kabiru Sokoto' to life imprisonment* – Vanguard; Andrew McGregor (5 Jul 2012) – *The mysterious death in custody of Boko Haram leader Habib Bama* – Terrorism Monitor, vol 10 iss 13, The Jamestown Foundation, cited in Zenn (Feb 2014). <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/12/catholic-church-bombing-court-sentences-kabiru-sokoto-life-imprisonment>; [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=39550&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39550&no_cache=1).

the trial that followed his arrest in early 2012, Sokoto confessed he received funding from a terrorist group based in Algeria, Muslimi Jaam'aa, "which he said meant 'the group from the sunset,' that sends money to them and also told them how they spend the money"³². Always according to Sokoto's confession, the mentioned funding, amounting to N40 million out of which Sokoto received N500,000, almost caused the group to split in two because of the way it was shared³³.

Concurrently with Nur's operations, Khalid al-Barnawi and Abu Muhammed, masterminded and coordinated northern Nigeria's first terrorism-related kidnapping of foreigners, British Chris McManus and the Italian engineer Franco Lamolinara, in May 2011. The operation was claimed by a previously unknown group called "al-Qa'ida in the Lands Beyond the Sahel" that distributed a proof-of-life video. It showed the two hostages blindfolded and kneeling in front of three veiled militants. As typical of Ansaru's leader and members, the militants concealed their identities and obscured their voices, while Shekau's face is visible in all of Boko Haram's videos. Moreover, Ansaru's militants wore Sahelian-style veils, unlike Boko Haram members who usually wear military camouflage or clothing. The group sent the video to Mauritania's Agence Nouakchott d'Information (ANI), which usually received AQIM videos, employed the same Mauritanian negotiator that AQIM had used in several previous kidnappings, reportedly demanding \$6 million and the release of prisoners in return for the two hostages³⁴.

1.2 The birth of Ansaru

According to Zenn, many motives of friction between north-western cells leaders and Shekau existed around the end of 2011 and they caused the birth of Boko Haram's splinter group Ansaru. One of them was the management, sharing and destination of use of money. In addition to the controversy of the previously mentioned donation from an Algerian group, Shekau got into a feud over control of funding with Abu Muhammed. Abu Qaqa, Boko Haram's spokesman, after his arrest in February 2012 revealed that "a major source of distrust and acrimony in the group was a N41million that was not accounted for"³⁵. "In the case of the 41 million naira (\$250,000) there was

³² Zenn (Feb 2014); Nnochiri (Dec 2013); Nnochiri (10 May 2013) – *Boko Haram gets sponsorship from Algeria, FG tells court* – Vanguard, cited in Zenn (Feb 2014); the Nation (Feb 2014). <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/05/boko-haram-gets-sponsorship-from-algeria-fg-tells-court>.

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Zenn (Mar 2013).

³⁵ Jide Ajani, Kingsley Omonobi (14 Feb 2012) – *How N41m tore Boko Haram apart – Qaqa* – Vanguard. <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/02/how-n41m-tore-boko-haram-apart-qaqa>.

acrimony because they did not quite know how the money was spent and nobody dared ask questions for fear of Shekau, who could pronounce death as his punishment”³⁶.

Another reason for controversy was Shekau’s reported favouritism of ethnic Kanuris of Borno for higher positions within the group and his preference of non-Kanuri for suicide operations, which may have driven Hausas, non-Nigerians and other non-Kanuris to ally with Nur, who was also non-Nigerian³⁷. Some militants had already sided with him against Shekau after Yusuf’s death, when he temporarily took control of the formation, because in their opinion his connections to al-Qa`ida made him a more competent leader than Shekau. As testified by Qaqa after his arrest, Shekau ordered the death of anyone who did not follow his orders and killed defectors; “everyone lived in fear more of the leadership of the group even than security agencies”³⁸. Furthermore, Boko Haram’s splinter cells preferred international and western targets to Nigerian ones. A determinant factor, though, was Shekau and Boko Haram indiscriminate use of violence, in particular the assassinations of Muslim leaders who disagreed with the group or were accused of cooperating with the government and the mass casualty attacks that killed Muslim civilians. Soon after Boko Haram attacks in Kano in January 2012 that killed more than 200 people, mostly Muslims, Ansaru³⁹ announced its official birth. On January 26, 2012⁴⁰, it distributed flyers in Kano expressing displeasure with Boko Haram operations and describing it as “inhuman” to the Muslim umma. Ansaru announced its will to restore “the lost dignity of Muslims in black Africa”⁴¹ and to bring back the dignity of Islam in Nigeria and the Sokoto Caliphate, founded by Othman Dan Fodio in 1804, which spread across

³⁶ Zenn (Feb 2014), footnote 32.

³⁷ Jacob Zenn (6 Feb 2015) – *The Power of Boko Haram: Local Roots, International Jihad* – The Tony Blair Faith Foundation. <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/power-boko-haram-local-roots-international-jihad>.

³⁸ Ajani, Omonobi (Feb 2012).

³⁹ As Jamā’at at-Tawhīd wal-Jihād fī Gharb ‘Afrīqqiyā (MUJAO), which at the time had just detached itself from AQIM (Dec 2011) although still acting under its name, Jamā’atu Anṣārīl Muslimīna fī Bilādīs Sūdān adopted a name that reflected its desired area of operations, respectively, Gharb Afriqiyya (West Africa) and Biladis Sudan (Land of the Blacks). (Zenn, March 2013).

⁴⁰ Video announcing the birth of Ansaru. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6ATD6bLaBI&feature=youtu.be>.

⁴¹ Vanguard (1 Feb 2012) – *Boko Haram: Splinter group, Ansaru emerges* – Vanguard, cited in Zenn (Mar 2014). <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/02/boko-haram-splinter-group-ansaru-emerges>.

Niger Republic, Cameroon and some other West African countries⁴². The flyers were signed by its leader Abu Usmatul al-Ansari, likely a pseudonym of al-Barnawi⁴³. Many of Ansaru's characteristics recalled al-Qa'ida's typical features. Ansaru's logo was composed of a rising sun over an open Quran between two machine guns with a black flag with the *shahada* coming out of the top of each, signifying that religion can only be implemented through the Quran and weapons. Zenn's analysis notes that the rising sun was also present in the logo of GSPC, AQIM's predecessor, and the national emblem of Algeria, the country of origin of both groups. He adds that possibly Ansaru's logo resembles GSPC's one instead of AQIM's one, because al-Barnawi fought with Belmokhtar in Algeria starting from 2005, when AQIM was not born yet⁴⁴. As regards ideology, Ansaru followed al-Qa'ida's *manhaj* (methodology), rejecting *takfir* and the killing of Muslim civilians. Its agenda was more similar to al-Qa'ida's than to Boko Haram's one as it was more international; it mainly focused on kidnappings and ambushes and its targets were international structures, foreign interests or Nigerian military facilities, contrary to Boko Haram that did not perform kidnappings and hit almost exclusively Nigerian objectives. While Boko Haram was active in north-eastern part of Nigeria, Ansaru operated in the north-western region, in the Middle Belt and also along the borders and in the neighbouring countries. In order to avoid the emergence of another Sheaku, who would kill anyone who disagreed with him, Ansaru stated in its charter that its leader (*amir*) should act in accordance with a *shura* (council). Major decisions, such as the opening of a new battlefield, negotiations with the government or the establishment of international relationships had to be taken in concert with the shura, whose ruling was binding on the amir⁴⁵. Ansaru's first operation is believed to be the already mention kidnapping of a British and Italian engineer, as "al-Qa'ida in the Lands Beyond the Sahel", the group that claimed it, is believed to be the predecessor of Ansaru. According to Zenn, on AQIM's advice the group

⁴² Ibidem.

⁴³ An Ansaru's member interviewed by the New York Times claimed that al Barnawi was Ansaru's leader. See Adam Nossiter (23 Apr 2013) – *New Threat in Nigeria as Militants Split Off* – New York Times.

⁴⁴ Jacob Zenn (21 Jun 2013) – *Ansaru Logo Gives Hints to Boko Haram and Transnational Links – Africa in Transition* John Campbell Blog, Council of Foreign Relations. <http://blogs.cfr.org/campbell/2013/06/21/ansaru-logo-gives-hints-to-boko-haram-and-transnational-links>.

⁴⁵ Zenn (Feb 2014) and "The Charter of Jama'at Ansar Al Muslimin Fi Bilad as-Sudan".

would have changed its name to avoid the attention of security agencies and to distance itself from Boko Haram's killing of Muslims⁴⁶.

In "A biography of Boko Haram and the bay'a to al Baghdadi" (March 2015), Zenn describes the three main cells that composed Ansaru and participated in its leadership council (*shura*) at the time, two of them had transnational links. The first Ansaru's cell was composed of the "GSPC network," which included Nigerians, such as Yusuf's close associate al-Barnawi, who had fought with GSPC but had detached from it after it became AQIM in 2007 to gain operational autonomy. Then he had transferred in the Sahara/Sahel region and had focused on kidnappings and criminal activities in the southern Sahel. He helped Yusuf followers to escape Nigeria and facilitated their training under GSPC. Al-Barnawi and others in his network had connections to old comrades like Belmokhtar, AQIM's former southern commander Abu Zayid⁴⁷, MUJAO leaders al Khairu and Hamaha, and Yunis al-Mauritani, a commander who facilitated GSPC evolution in AQIM thanks to his contact with al Qa'ida Central (AQC) in Afghanistan/Pakistan (he was appointed "responsible for external work in Africa and west Asia" by Osama Bin Laden himself)⁴⁸. The second Ansaru cell was composed of the "AQIM network". It was led by Mamman Nur and it included militants who fought with AQIM or were trained and/or funded by AQIM, such as Yusuf's other associates, Adam Kamar, who trained or facilitated the training of Nigerians militants in Malian AQIM's training camps and was in contact with AQC (possibly via Yunus al-Mauritani) and Kabiru Sokoto, specialised in planning and financing suicide vehicle-bombings. The third Ansaru's cell was the "Middle Belt network". It included mid-level recruits who supported the more experienced two other networks⁴⁹.

As a result of the disputes and Ansaru detachment from Boko Haram, the latter reportedly tipped off Nigerian authorities about the location of Abu Muhammed's shura, who was killed together with several shura members in

⁴⁶ Zenn (May 2014); "Better for you to be silent and pretend to be a "domestic" movement that has its own causes and concerns. There is no call for you to show that we have an expansionary, jihadi, Qaida or any other sort of project", in AP (20 Jul 2012) – *Mali Al-Qaeda Sahara's playbook* – AP.

⁴⁷ Abdel Hamid Zayid (aka Mohammed Ghadir or Abu Zaid), like Belmokhtar, was an AQIM's southern commander who detached from the group and formed his own called Tariq ibn Zayid or al-Fedayeen, but kept fighting under AQIM as part of the Islamic Emirate of the Sahara. His group carried out several kidnappings, like the one of French Pierre Camatte in 2010, and murdered British hostage Edwin Dyer in 2009, French hostage Michael Germeneau in 2010 and two of the five French employees of Areva in 2010. Source: Atwan (2012).

⁴⁸ See Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000019, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Jacob Zenn (19 March 2015) – *A biography of Boko Haram and the bay'a to al Baghdadi* – CTC Sentinel, vol 8 issue 3, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

Kaduna in March 2012. Other militants connected to it, including Kabiru Sokoto and Habibu Bama, were also arrested or killed in 2012. Because of the information revealed by Shekau's group, the British and Italian hostages in Sokoto were killed. Other pieces of information about "unfaithful" Ansaru's cells leaked to Nigerian security forces also led to the disruption of an AQIM-related cell in Kano that had kidnapped a German engineer, causing his death, and to the killing of Kamar in Kano in August 2012. After the break-up of Ansaru's shura, its remaining leaders linked to Boko Haram were al-Barnawi in the Middle Belt and Nur in Kano⁵⁰.

1.3 Boko Haram and Ansaru's presence in Mali

Another element in favour of the existence of links between Boko Haram/Ansaru and AQIM introduced by Zenn is the presence of their militants in Mali during the Tuareg rebellion in 2012. He writes that groups of fighters belonging to Boko Haram and Ansaru's networks left Nigeria to join AQIM and its allies and help them to gain control of northern Mali. After a coup d'état by part of the Malian army, the Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) was joined by the Islamist Tuareg group Ansar ad-Din in the fight against the Malian government to obtain the independence of Azawad⁵¹ that it had started in January. The coalition later expanded to include AQIM and MUJAO, but soon MNLA, which was sceptical of the Islamist influence over the new state's future and the imposition of Islamic law preferring a secular state, distanced itself from the coalition, as it was more concerned about seeing Azawad's independence accepted. In the summer of 2012, a few hundred Boko Haram militants reportedly got involved in the fight, helped capturing Gao and conducted attacks together with MUJAO. The Islamists factions outnumbered MNLA and by July took full control of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal. By the end of November 2012 they had complete control over northern Mali and threatened the southern region and the capital Bamako.

Zenn notes that several sources attested Boko Haram and Ansaru's involvement in Mali. Several news reports from Mali reported that more than 100 Boko Haram militants reinforced MUJAO's positions in the battle for Gao and that they helped it raiding the Algerian consulate in Gao and kidnapping the vice-consul, who was executed by MUJAO on September 2, 2012⁵².

⁵⁰ Zenn (Feb 2014).

⁵¹ Azawad is the Tuareg name for the region north of Timbuktu that today covers the regions of Timbuktu, Kidal and Gao in northern Mali. The word is also used, by extension, to include the traditional Tuareg domains of northern Niger and southern Algeria.

⁵² Vanguard (9 Apr 2012) – *Dozens of Boko Haram help Mali's rebel seize Gao* – Vanguard; RFI (10 Apr 2012) – *Boko Haram en renfort des islamistes armés dans le nord du Mali* – Radio

Military officials from Niger said that Boko Haram militants were transiting Niger towards Mali on a daily basis⁵³. A MUJAO commander interviewed by Radio France Internationale said that Boko Haram members were arriving in Gao en masse⁵⁴. Zenn also reports the testimonies of U.S. Africa Commander General Carter Ham, who in February 2012 expressed his concern about Boko Haram, AQIM and al-Shabaab “aspirational intent [...] to more closely collaborate and synchronize their efforts” and in December that Boko Haram militants train in camps in northern Mali and most likely receive financing and explosives from AQIM⁵⁵. In addition, Zenn reports that the ministers of foreign affairs of Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and Algeria, Mauritania confirmed the links between Boko Haram and AQIM during a Sahel security summit in 2012⁵⁶. Zenn affirms that further evidence of the connection of Boko Haram to Gao comes from a video released by Boko Haram leader Shekau in November 2012. In contrast to Shekau’s first five video statements of 2012, the November 29 video is the first to show Shekau not seated in a room wearing traditional Islamic dress, but wearing green camouflaged military fatigues and training in a desert in northern Mali with heavily armed and veiled militants. It was unique because Shekau spoke in Arabic (as opposed to Hausa or Kanuri, which he usually uses) and he praised the “brothers and shaykhs in the Islamic Maghreb” and “soldiers of the Islamic State of Mali”. The video was also not disseminated via YouTube like the previous five videos, but for the first time posted on a jihadist online forum. In the video, Shekau

France International; AFP (2 Sep 2012) – *Malian extremists execute kidnapped Algerian diplomat* – France 24, cited in Zenn (Jan 2013).

<http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/04/dozens-of-boko-haram-help-malis-rebel-seize-gao/>;
<http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20120410-mali-bamako-gao-tombouctou-boko-haram-ansar-dine>;
<http://www.france24.com/en/20120902-malian-extremists-execute-kidnapped-algerian-diplomat>

⁵³ Reuters (7 Oct 2012) – *Niger seeks joint southern border patrols to bar Boko Haram* – Reuters, cited in Zenn (Jan 2013).

<http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-niger-bokoharam-idUKBRE89609Z20121007>

⁵⁴ Serge Daniel (4 Aug 2012) – *Bilal Hicham, rebelle du nord du Mali* – Radio France International, cited in Zenn (Jan 2013). <http://www.rfi.fr/emission/20120804-mali-bilal-hicham>.

⁵⁵ United States Africa Command Public Affairs (29 Feb 2012) – *TRANSCRIPT: General Ham, Admiral Stavridis Testify Before House Armed Services Committee* – United States Africa Command; United States Africa Command Public Affairs (3 Dec 2012) – *TRANSCRIPT: General Ham Discusses Security Challenges, Opportunities at George Washington University* – United States Africa Command, cited in Zenn (Jan 2013).

<http://www.africom.mil/newsroom/transcript/8834/transcript-general-ham-admiral-stavridis-testify-b>; <http://www.africom.mil/Newsroom/Transcript/10170/transcript-general-ham-discusses-security-challeng>.

⁵⁶ Raby Ould Idoumou and Bakari Guèye (27 Jan 2012) – *Faltering Al-Qaeda Turns To Boko Haram* – Maghrebica, cited in Zenn (Jan 2013).

appealed to al-Qa'ida by paying homage to “martyred” leaders such as Usama bin Ladin, Abu Yahya al-Libi and Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi. He recited five of the ten *suras* in the Qur'an that are most commonly quoted by al-Qa'ida, and he called the United States, the United Kingdom, Nigeria and Israel “crusaders”, warning them that “jihad has begun”.

According to Zenn another element that shows that Boko Haram was in Mali is represented by the introduction in Nigeria of tactics typical of desert warfare familiar to al-Qa'ida, like the mounting of weapons onto 4x4 pickups, used in Gao in 2012 and in Nigeria for the first time in March 2013. Other methods typically used by al-Qa'ida that were imported in the country in the same period were suicide attacks, car bombing, IEDs, coordinated actions and abductions for ransom. Moreover, in terms of ideology, while MUJAO was mostly opposed to France, whereas Boko Haram was mostly opposed to the Nigerian government and the US, starting in 2013 Boko Haram also began to adopt MUJAO's enmity of France and, in February and December 2013, it kidnapped a French family and a French priest in Cameroon, in revenge for the “French President's war on Islam” in Mali. As regards Ansaru, Zenn believes that the most compelling evidence of its presence in Gao was a poster with Ansaru's logo that Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* found in Belmokhtar's compound in Gao in February 2013⁵⁷. Other examples were the attack that Nigerians reportedly led on the Algerian consulate in Gao in April 2012 and the kidnapping and execution of the Algerian diplomats in November 2012, as Algeria has long been the primary target of AQIM and Belmokhtar as well as MUJAO and in the past also of al-Barnawi. Moreover, the kidnapping and the raids reflected Ansaru's *modus operandi*⁵⁸.

1.4 Breaking of Boko Haram's connection to AQIM and its offshoots in the Sahel and reintegration of Ansaru into Boko Haram

The international community became more and more concerned about the situation and mobilised: France, in accordance with Mali and Niger, decided to intervene in order to protect its economic interests, in particular, the uranium mines in Niger near the Malian border, where French companies operated. In January 2013, France launched operation Serval followed by operation Barkhane in August 2014. Zenn explains that the French intervention, together with the previous raid on Ansaru's shura, broke the majority of

⁵⁷ Lars Inge Staveland (22 Feb 2013) – *Ny islamistgruppe kan være tilknyttet Al-Qaida* – *Aftenposten.no*, cited in Zenn (Jan 2014). <http://www.aftenposten.no/nyheter/uriks/Ny-islamistgruppe-kan-vare-tilknyttet-Al-Qaida-7128670.html#.UtKWlfZRF0E>.

⁵⁸ Jacob Zenn (20 Jan 2014) – *Nigerians in Gao: was Boko Haram really active in Northern Mali?* – *African Arguments*. <http://africanarguments.org/2014/01/20/nigerians-in-gao-was-boko-haram-active-in-northern-mali-by-jacob-zenn>.

Ansaru's connections to AQIM and the Sahara/Sahel groups, and brought its militants to reintegrate into Boko Haram. At the same time, the military crackdown that the Nigerian government launched in mid-2013, which included the establishment of a military Joint Task Force to defeat Boko Haram, killed many high-ranking members of Shekau's shura, a fact that likely facilitated the process of reintegration with Ansaru.

Zenn says that the first signs of Boko Haram and Ansaru reconciliation were represented by Shekau's November 29 video in support of the "soldiers of the Islamic State in Mali" and their fighting side by side in Mali. Then, "al-Barnawi and Shekau may have agreed for Shekau's faction to be responsible for most of Yobe and Borno States in Nigeria, while al-Barnawi's faction, now also known as Harakat al-Muhajirin, would operate in northern Cameroon and northern Borno and along the logistics routes from Libya through Niger, Chad, and Cameroon that supplied Boko Haram in Nigeria"⁵⁹. Barnawi's faction had to carry out abductions for ransom, part of which would finance Boko Haram's operations, while Boko Haram would in turn provide security cover to his group⁶⁰. Ansaru's "AQIM network" likely disbanded as some of its members and key AQIM and MUJAO contact figures, such as MUJAO's Oumar oud Hamaha, and AQIM southern commander Zayid, were killed. As for "GSPC network", its isolation likely compelled it to reintegrate with Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria, even though some of its members may have disagreed with Shekau's takfiri ideology and been reluctant to accept his overall leadership. Also the "Middle Belt network" lost its connections to AQIM and MUJAO, but continued to carry out attacks in Ansaru's name outside of Boko Haram's area of operations in Jos and Bauchi and possibly coordinate kidnappings and other operations with Harakat al-Muhajirin in Cameroon. Once Ansaru's other two networks reintegrated with Boko Haram, it became the only network using the Ansaru name⁶¹. In support of the described reconstruction of Boko Haram-Ansaru-AQIM relations, Zenn states that Boko Haram first announced a "coordinated" operation with Ansaru in November 2013, when it kidnapped a French priest in Cameroon⁶². In addition, Boko Haram started claiming kidnappings for ransom; indeed, Nigerian Joint Task Force reported in April 2013 that Boko Haram had

⁵⁹ Zenn (Mar 2015).

⁶⁰ AFP – *Barnawi, Kamar: Qaeda-linked militants with Boko Haram ties* – ModernGhana.com, cited in Zenn (Feb 2014). <https://www.modernghana.com/news/402681/1/barnawi-kambar-qaeda-linked-militants-with-boko-ha.html>.

⁶¹ Zenn (Mar 2015).

⁶² AFP (15 Nov 2013) – *Boko Haram holding kidnapped French priest* – Source – Vanguard, cited in Zenn (Mar 2015). <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/11/boko-haram-holding-kidnapped-french-priest-source>.

tasked a “special kidnapping squad” to carry out kidnappings of government officials, foreigners and wealthy individuals in Borno⁶³. Zenn notes that it is consistent with the fact that Boko Haram did not carry out any kidnappings until the mentioned “squad” was formed. In the proof-of-life video that Boko Haram released in February 2013 claiming the kidnapping of the French man Tanguy Moulin-Fournier, who worked for the French gas group Suez, and his family, an Arabic-speaking militant said that the operation was in retaliation for the president of France’s “war on Islam” in Mali. Zenn notes that the theme, the language and kidnapping victim profile are ascribable more to Ansaru than to Boko Haram, probably reflecting the influence of the reintegrated networks into the main formation. Moreover, he highlights the evolution of Boko Haram’s modus operandi underlining that its complexity and the audacity of its attacks followed the trend of its cooperation with AQIM. Boko Haram’s trademark was originally the use of gunmen on motorbikes, then it escalated to suicide bombings around 2011, after the return of the Yusuf followers who trained with AQIM. Starting from 2013, after its fighters came back from Mali, it began employing increasingly sophisticated tactics as coordinated attacks involving more than 100 militants, the mounting of weapons on 4x4 pick-ups and even raids on cities involving 200-300 militants, the use of heavy weapons, bomb-making expertise and guerrilla warfare tactics⁶⁴.

The major offensive launched by the Nigerian government in 2013 weakened Boko Haram insurgency, but only temporarily, as in 2014, through a strong counter-offensive, it was able to gain control of about 25 cities in Yobe, Adamawa and Borno states and along the border with Cameroon. On August 24, after taking over the city of Gwoza, Shekau released a video in which he declared the region under the control of an Islamic Caliphate. It was not clear if it was an attempt to link Boko Haram to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, since neither the group nor its leader al-Baghdadi were mentioned⁶⁵. On March 7, 2015, Shekau pledged loyalty (bay`a) to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and on 13 the Islamic State accepted Boko Haram pledge of allegiance. The reintegration of Ansaru’s GSPC and AQIM networks into Boko Haram and the longstanding contacts they maintained with North Af-

⁶³ Ola’ Audu (20 May 2013) – *How Boko Haram turned to kidnapping to raise funds in Borno* – Premium Times, cited in Jacob Zenn (25 Jun 2013) – *Boko Haram’s evolving tactics and alliances in Nigeria* – CTC Sentinel, vol 6 issue 6, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/135082-how-boko-haram-turned-to-kidnapping-to-raise-funds-in-borno.html>.

⁶⁴ Zenn (Jun 2013).

⁶⁵ Jacob Zenn (26 Sept 2014) – *Boko Haram’s Emerging Caliphate in Nigeria: Will Maiduguri Fall?* – Terrorism Monitor, vol 12 issue 18, The Jamestown Foundation. [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=42879&no_cache=1#.VckJmPkn6pQ](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=42879&no_cache=1#.VckJmPkn6pQ)

rican former AQIM militants who abandoned AQIM in favour of the Islamic State in Syria and Libya likely facilitated the dialogue that was necessary to establish Boko Haram's merger with the Islamic State and its evolution in Wilayat West Africa⁶⁶.

1.5 Why AQIM relation was mainly with Ansaru and not with Boko Haram?

In a section of its analysis entitled "Cooperation or competition: Boko Haram and Ansaru after the Mali intervention" (27 March 2013), Zenn points out that, besides the connections that personally linked GSPC/AQIM and its splinter groups to Ansaru, there were several reasons why AQIM preferred fostering relations with Ansaru over Boko Haram.

Firstly, the preference for an international operative direction: both groups mainly selected similar international, western or foreign interests as targets, in line with the idea of global jihad promoted by AQIC and its leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Secondly, Boko Haram was based in Borno and its area of operation was north-eastern Nigeria, which is more than 1600 km from Mali, on the contrary, Ansaru operated in north-western Nigeria, which is less than 500 km from it, so it was geographically easier to cooperate with Ansaru.

Thirdly, Boko Haram targets included Muslim leaders who disagreed with it and its attacks caused many Muslim civilian casualties, two elements that were contrary to AQIM's line of action and that could have affected its reputation and the support of the population. One of the reasons AQIM's leadership belonging to GSPC broke away from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria in the late 1990s was because it killed many Algerian civilians during civil war in the country⁶⁷.

However, Zenn also notes that, as regards relations between Ansaru and Boko Haram and AQIM offshoots, on one hand, as their operations before the transition of Boko Haram to the Islamic State showed, each group had its area of operations, which avoided conflicts among them. On the other hand, differences in ideology did not represent necessarily an obstacle to operative cooperation and that their organizational structures were permeable, which in case of necessity allowed mid-level militants to operate, for example, with Boko Haram, Ansaru and MUJAO⁶⁸.

Several other analysts and institutes have expressed their favourable opinion about the existence of links between AQIM and Boko Haram or its splin-

⁶⁶ Zenn (Mar 2015).

⁶⁷ Zenn (Mar 2013).

⁶⁸ Zenn (Mar 2013) and Zenn (Feb 2014).

ter group Ansaru. Some of their views expressed in the most recent publications will follow.

In April 2015, Raffello Pantucci e Sasha Jasperson of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) wrote a paper entitled “From Boko Haram to Ansaru – The Evolution of Nigerian Jihad”. Like Zenn, they point out the personal connections to AQIM of Boko Haram members, and then Ansaru leaders, as Abu Mohammed, al-Barnawi and Kamar. Their reconstruction of the detachment of Ansaru from Boko Haram is in line with Zenn’s, but among the reason behind it they underline the Fulani ethnicity of the majority of Ansaru’s militants, opposed to the prevalence of Kanuri members in Boko Haram, as a motive of discrimination by Shekau’s group. As regards Boko Haram’s connections to AQIM, they highlight the references emerging from Ansaru and AQIM’s claims of kidnapped hostages. In February 2013, Ansaru kidnapped seven expatriate workers, 2 Lebanese, 2 Syrians, a Briton, a Greek and an Italian citizen employed by Lebanese road construction company Setraco. It claimed responsibility through a Twitter message, saying that the men were being held for “the transgression and atrocities done to the religion of Allah by the European countries in many places such as Afghanistan and Mali and that any intervention [...] not in accordance with its demands would led to the same result of “the previous attempt”⁶⁹. According to the authors, “previous attempt” was a reference to the failed attempt by British and Nigerian special forces to rescue Franco Lamolinara and Chris McManus, two hostages captured in May 2011 who were killed just before being reached by the militaries. The kidnapping of Lamolinara and McManus had been claimed by a group calling itself “Al-Qa’ida in the lands beyond the Sahel”, which never reappeared again, suggesting that there was the same group behind both kidnappings. A German engineer, Edgar Fritz Raupach, was taken in January 2012 and AQIM issued a statement through the Agence Nouakchott d’Information (ANI) demanding the release of the wife of an incarcerated German terrorist connected to the Islamic Jihad Union in Pakistan. Raupach was executed by his captors when an attempt was made to rescue him in May 2012. Again, in a message directed to the German government, the group referenced the “recent lessons taught to the UK [...] by the mujahedeen”⁷⁰,

⁶⁹ Jide Ajani and Suzan Edeh (24 Feb 2013) – *Abduction of Foreigners: Security forces close in on kidnappers* – Vanguard, in Freedom C. Onuoha (14 Mar 2013), *Jama’atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan: Nigeria’s Evolving terrorist group* – Al Jazeera Center for Studies, cited in Raffaello Pantucci and Sasha Jasperson (Apr 2015) – *From Boko Haram to Ansaru – The Evolution of Nigerian Jihad* – The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).

<http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/02/abduction-of-foreigners-security-forces-close-in-on-kidnappers>.

⁷⁰ Zenn (Mar 2013).

suggesting one more time that Ansaru executed the operation and was in close contact with AQIM. In addition to that, the authors affirm that the similarities between these kidnappings and AQIM's indicate strong links between Ansaru and AQIM.

They conclude that the connection of Boko Haram and Ansaru to AQIM and other Sahelian groups was strong, although it was "uncertain the degree to which there was any sort of formal command and control among them"⁷¹. They add that the formations saw each other as "ideological fellows", and the Sahelian groups repeatedly provided assistance to the Nigerian groups. During the period that preceded Boko Haram merger with the Islamic State, it was not clear the degree to which the link between AQIM and its offshoots and the Nigerian groups persisted. As regards Boko Haram and Ansaru, there was not any clear delineating barrier between the two; "they occasionally operated together to varying degrees, depending on the operation and intent, despite at the same time maintaining quite strong and divergent ideological perspectives. The groups saw each other as companions in a common effort, though they do not always agree on the method to use. [...] The division was a relatively flexible one"⁷².

In April 2014, the International Crisis Group published the second report of a series dedicated to violence in Nigeria entitled "Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency". Although some details of ICG's reconstruction are slightly different from Zenn's one, the report confirms the existence of links between members of Boko Haram and both AQC and AQIM. It also goes as far as defining Ansaru as "Nigeria's al-Qa'ida franchise"⁷³. According to the report, between 2010 and 2014 Boko Haram had split in several sub-groups and, after the killing and the arrest of top commanders and *shura* members and the French intervention in Mali, six factions remained. The largest was the one led by Shekau, which was mainly active in the north-east part of the country and was responsible for the majority of the attacks. Shakau also nominally controlled the fighters commanded by Nur. Another faction was headed by Aminu Tashen-Ilimi. He fought alongside Shakau and was among the commanders who led the 2009 Maiduguri uprising, during which Yusuf allegedly gave him 40 million naira (\$275,000) to buy arms from the Niger Delta. After Yusuf's murder he relocated to Kaduna, where he reportedly used the money to establish himself as a car dealer; while he was believed to still control a faction, he kept a low profile. Ansaru faction was

⁷¹ Pantucci and Jaspersen (Apr 2015).

⁷² Ibidem.

⁷³ ICG (3 Apr 2014) – *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency* – ICG Africa Report n°216, International Crisis Group (ICG).

commanded by Khalid Barnawi. ICG describes it as a Boko Haram's splinter group which appeared to act independently. A fifth faction was led by Abdullahi Damasak, also known as Mohammed Marwan. The sixth was based in Bauchi and led by Engineer Abubakar Shehu, alias "Abu Sumayya". As sources, ICG cites interviews it conducted with Boko Haram members in August 2013. As regards Boko Haram links to al-Qa'ida, the ICG reports that according to a Nigerian police officer interviewed in July 2013, after June 2009 insurrection, 30 members were arrested in Adamawa state and admitted having received training in Afghanistan. It adds that, between 2000 and 2002, Osama bin Laden issued two audio messages calling on Nigerian Muslims to wage jihad and establish an Islamic state. During his 1992-1996 stay in Sudan, he reportedly met Mohammed Ali, a Nigerian from Maiduguri studying at the Islamic University in Khartoum who became his disciple and trained in Afghanistan. Boko Haram sources interviewed in October 2013 revealed that Bin Laden asked him to organise a cell in Nigeria and gave him a budget of N300 million (approximately \$3 million in 2000). Ali returned in Nigeria in 2002 and began funding religious activities of Salafi groups and one of the beneficiaries was allegedly Mohammed Yusuf's group. ICG affirms that Boko Haram's links to foreign Islamist groups became stronger after 2009 clashes, in particular with AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar ad-Din, because many followers of Yusuf escaped through Chad and Niger to Somalia, Algeria and, reportedly, Afghanistan, where they joined other Islamists formations, received guerrilla training and acquired bomb-making skills. It also mentions AQIM offer of its financial resources, military arsenals and training facilities to Boko Haram in statements and declarations by its leaders. ICG also reports that the Nigerian military believes the links between the various groups are significant. On 27 September 2012, Chief of Army Staff Lt.-General Azubike Ihejirika said Boko Haram was funded and equipped from abroad, citing as evidence the types of weapons and communication equipment it uses and the expertise it displays with IEDs. It also affirms that Niger security services arrested several couriers carrying money and messages between AQIM, MUJAO and Boko Haram.

ICG states that links between Ansaru and AQIM and its related offshoots in the Sahel were even stronger and it became "Nigeria's al-Qa'ida franchise". As stated by Zenn, the report confirms that at its core there were Yusuf's followers who left Nigeria to train with AQIM and its allies in Algeria, Mali and Somalia and that Kamar and al-Barnawi were among them and forged a close alliance with the group. Ansaru's members chose as their leader Kamar, alias "Abu Yasir", who was killed in August 2012. He was substituted by al-Barnawi, who has been leading the group ever since under the name "Abu Usamatal Ansari". In interviews conducted by ICG in November 2012, an

Ansaru member claimed that “Bin Laden’s deputy (now al-Qaeda leader), Aiman Al-Zawahiri, communicated directly with Kamar”⁷⁴. As evidence of AQIM-Ansaru relation, ICG reports a donation 40 million naira (\$265,000) to Shekau by al-Barnawi as an attempt to forge an alliance. According to an Ansaru member interviewed in November 2012, this almost tore Boko Haram apart, because leaders disagreed over its use and because Barnawi wanted periodic expenditure details, a request Shekau rejected saying he had no right to the money he gave as charity. “After they reconciled, Barnawi allegedly entered into a deal by which Shekau, who had the men, would provide security cover, while Barnawi, who had the skills, would kidnap Westerners. Part of the ransom money would fund Boko Haram operations”⁷⁵. In line with Zenn’s work, the ICG report mentions the November 29, 2012, video that Shekau posted on Islamist forums saluting global jihadists and expressing Boko Haram’s solidarity with al-Qa’ida and its leaders. According to the institute, that represented “a radical departure from the group’s domestic focus” and a first sign of reconciliation between Boko Haram and Ansaru. Other signs of the rapprochement was Shekau’s decision to make Babagana Assalafi, Barnawi’s closest disciple, his deputy and the role assumed by al-Barnawi as AQIM channel for the supply of funds and weapons to both Ansaru and Boko Haram. Finally, the French intervention in Mali disrupted the connections between the groups compromising the money and arms supply lines and forced Ansaru and Boko Haram to work even more closely together⁷⁶.

In January 2015, a report by Amy Pate for the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) entitled “Boko Haram: An Assessment of Strengths, Vulnerabilities, and Policy Options” confirms Boko Haram’s connections to AQIM saying that they worked together extensively. Supporting Zenn’s work and using it as a source together with interviews conducted in Nigeria with government officials, it affirms that the relation dates back to mid-2000s, when AQIM trained some of Yusuf’s followers. It adds that AQIM reportedly provided training, financing and arms to the Nigerian group and offered further assistance through statements issued by its leadership.⁷⁷ It underlines the personal connections established

⁷⁴ ICG (Apr 2014).

⁷⁵ Ibidem.

⁷⁶ Ibidem.

⁷⁷ Zenn (Feb 2014); Zenn (Jan 2013); interviews with diplomatic source and government security official conducted in 2014, cited in Amy Pate (Jan 2015) – *Boko Haram: An Assessment of Strengths, Vulnerabilities, and Policy Options* – Report to the Strategic Multilayer Assessment Office of the Department of Defense, and the Office of University Programs of the Department of Homeland Security, University of Maryland, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). See also START Background Report (May

by figures like Kambar, al-Barnawi and Nur with AQIM while they trained in its camps in the desert (with the exception of Nur who trained in Somalia with al-Shabaab).⁷⁸ It also confirms Boko Haram's presence in Mali alongside al-Qa'ida's northern African branch and MUJAO during the fight against the government of the country in 2012⁷⁹. Another element highlighted by the report is the evolution of Boko Haram's modus operandi, in particular, the increasing complexity of its attacks, alongside the growth of AQIM's influence. As the other analyses, it states that the relation between the Nigerian group and AQIM and its offshoots in the Sahel, especially the one with the Algeria-based main formation, has weakened after 2013 because of the French intervention in Mali⁸⁰.

Freedom Onuoha, Research Fellow and Head of the Department of Conflict, Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Studies at the Centre for Strategic Research and Studies of the National Defence College, Abuja, Nigeria, has extensively published material on Boko Haram. He supports the view that there were ties between Boko Haram and AQIM. In his work, he refers to the financial assistance Boko Haram received from foreign terrorist networks. In 2007, Yusuf was tried for terrorism-related offences and one of the charges was receiving money from AQC to recruit terrorists to attack the residences of foreigners, especially Americans, living in Nigeria. He further makes reference to Kabiru Abubakar Dikko Umar, alias "Kabiru Sokoto"'s confession in which he admitted he received funds from an Algeria-based Islamic group, Musilimi Yaa'maa, and that the sharing of the money caused controversies within Boko Haram⁸¹.

The evolution of Boko Haram's tactics and the operational sophistication it has attained in constructing IEDs are among the reasons that Onuoha reports as evidence of a possible support provided to the group by AQIM in the areas of training and acquisition of explosives. If until 2010 its preferred

2014) – Boko Haram recent attacks – National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START).

⁷⁸ Zenn (Feb 2014), and interview with government researcher conducted in 2014, cited in Pate (Jan 2015).

⁷⁹ Zenn (Feb 2014); Zenn (Jan 2013); interview with diplomatic source and government official conducted in 2014, cited in Pate (Jan 2015).

⁸⁰ Pate (Jan 2015).

⁸¹ Tobi Soniyi, Muhammad Bello and Yemi Akinsuyi – *Kabir Sokoto Trial: Sharing of Funds Split Boko Haram* – This Day Live, cited in Freedom Onuoha (2014) – *Boko Haram and the Salafi Jihadist Threat in Nigeria*, in Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (2014) – *Boko Haram: Islamism, politics, security and the state in Nigeria* – West African Politics and Society Series, vol. 2, African Studies Centre (ASC)/Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique (IFRA). <http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/kabir-sokoto-trial--sharing-of-funds-split-boko-haram/147166>.

methods to conduct attacks were targeted assassination and hit-and-run drive-by-shooting often on motorbikes, around 2010-2011, it started using of IEDs, suicide bombing and sometimes open arms confrontation. Citing US Joint IED Defeat Organization's data, Onuoha writes that Nigeria witnessed a nearly fourfold jump in the number of IED attacks in 2011. The bomb incidents in the country increased from 196 in 2011 to 52 in 2010. Another new tactic introduced in Nigeria by Boko Haram around the same time was suicide bombing. Among the factors that could account for the adoption of suicide terrorism, Onuoha mentions "the sect's bond with foreign terror groups, leading to increased fanatic indoctrination of its members by experienced ideologues skilled in evoking visions of martyrdom to radicalise recruits"⁸². Onuoha also makes reference to the statements of reciprocal support issues by AQIM and Boko Haram and the al-Qa'ida-style propaganda promoted by the Nigerian formation. As Zenn, he mentions March 2010 Boko Haram's declaration that it was "joining Al-Qaeda", AQIM leader Droukdel's statement of February 2010 in which he offered assistance to the group in terms weapons and training, the manifesto of July 2010, where Shekau linked the jihad being fought by Boko Haram with jihadist efforts globally, expressed solidarity with Al-Qa'ida and threatened the US.

Onuoha believes that "Boko Haram ideologues were convinced that the sect was largely impotent and had to do the extraordinary to be able to liberate their religion from the hands of infidels in reference to the Nigerian state. The sense of impotence drove Boko Haram ideologues to establish links with like-minded Salafi Jihadist groups in Africa"⁸³, like AQIM and Al-Shabaab. To this end, after July 2009 clashes between Yusuf's followers and Nigerian security forces, many of the former fled Nigeria to train with the mentioned groups⁸⁴. Then, Onuoha reports the presence of Boko Haram's fighters in Mali during the insurgency started in 2012⁸⁵.

As regards Ansaru, Onuoha agrees with Zenn's position and, citing his work as a source, he affirms that "analysts believe that Ansaru is strongly connected to AQIM"⁸⁶. He also makes reference to Barnawi as a key bridge figure between the two and hints at the possibility of a rapprochement between Boko Haram and Ansaru as a consequence of the crackdown by Nigerian security forces and the French intervention against the Islamists groups in the Sahel⁸⁷.

⁸² Onuoha (2014), p. 173.

⁸³ Onuoha (2014), p. 179.

⁸⁴ Onuoha (2014).

⁸⁵ Pindiga (6 Feb 2013) – *Boko Haram training camps found in Mali – Over 200 Nigerians trained for 10 months in Timbuktu* – Daily Trust, cited in Onuoha (2014).

⁸⁶ Onuoha (2014), p. 184.

⁸⁷ Onuoha (2014).

In June 2014, Olivier Guitta, Director of Research at The Henry Jackson Society, and Robin Simcox, a Research Fellow at the same think-tank, published a briefing paper entitled “Terrorism in Nigeria: the Threat from Boko Haram and Ansaru” and in one of the sections they analysed al-Qa’ida ties to both groups. As regards Boko Haram, they make reference to the distribution of \$3 million by bin Laden to Salafi groups in Nigeria through one of his emissaries in 2002, part of which was received by Yusuf⁸⁸. Then, they refer to the documents found in bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound in May 2011 which showed that Boko Haram’s leaders were “in contact with top levels of al-Qa’eda”, possibly Bin Laden too⁸⁹. The authors also mention Boko Haram’s statements in support of al-Qa’ida and cite the November 29, 2012 video in which Shekau praises al-Qa’ida, its leaders and its fighters across the world, and threatens the US, Britain, Israel and Nigeria.⁹⁰ The paper adds that further evidence that Boko Haram was tied to the broader al-Qa’ida network emerges from the ICG report (the one already presented above), which said that fighters of Boko Haram are also believed to have trained in Afghanistan and, between 2010 and 2012, in Somalia with al-Shabaab, which would become an al-Qa’ida’s ally in February 2012⁹¹.

Guitta and Simcox further state that “it is via AQIM that Boko Haram’s main ties to al-Qa’eda exist”⁹². In support of this, they point to Droukdel’s interview to the New York Times in 2008⁹³, in which he confirmed that members were training in the Sahel alongside AQIM, and to his January 2010 statement in which he offered AQIM’s assistance to the Nigerian formation in terms of training, personnel and equipment⁹⁴. They also touch upon the

⁸⁸ Eli Lake (11 May 2014) – *Boko Haram’s Bin Laden Connection* – The Daily Beast, cited in Guitta and Simcox (Jun 2014) – *Terrorism in Nigeria: the Threat of Boko Haram and Ansaru* – The Henry Jackson Society.

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/11/boko-haram-s-bin-laden-connection.html>.

⁸⁹ Jason Burke (29 Apr 2012) – *Bin Laden files show al-Qa’ida and Taliban leaders in close contact* – The Guardian, cited in Guitta and Simcox (Jun 2014).

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/29/bin-laden-al-qaida-taliban-contact>

⁹⁰ Bill Roggio (30 Nov 2012) – *Boko Haram emir praises al Qa’eda* – The Long War Journal, cited in Guitta and Simcox (Jun 2014).

http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/11/boko_haram_emir_prai.php.

⁹¹ ICG (Apr 2014), cited in Guitta and Simcox (Jun 2014).

⁹² Guitta and Simcox (Jun 2014), p. 11.

⁹³ NYT (1 Jul 2008) – *An Interview With Abdelmalek Droukdel* – The New York Times, cited in Guitta and Simcox (Jun 2014). http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdel.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1.

⁹⁴ Felipe Pathé Duarte (28 Sep 2011) – *Maghrebian Militant Maneuvers: AQIM as a Strategic Challenge* – Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), cited in Guitta and Simcox (Jun 2014). <http://csis.org/publication/maghrebian-militant-maneuvers-aqim-strategic-challenge>.

changes in Boko Haram messages released on the internet, noticing a style more similar to AQIM, which suggests an influence of the group also on the media component. In addition, on October 2, 2010, AQIM's media wing, al-Andalus Establishment for Media Production, published Boko Haram's statement on a jihadist forum, disseminating a message for another group for the first time⁹⁵. Guitta and Simcox also write that when the US government designated Shekau a terrorist, it suspected that there were “communications, training, and weapons links”⁹⁶ between Boko Haram, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, al-Shabaab and AQIM. Moreover, in February 2013, AFRICOM Commander General David M. Rodriguez named Boko Haram as an al-Qa'ida “affiliate” in a Senate Armed Services Committee confirmation hearing⁹⁷.

According to the authors the AQIM – Boko Haram connection represented also a source of financing for the Nigerian group. A report by the Nigerian police and military suggested that AQIM offered Boko Haram approximately N40 million (\$250,000) as part of a planned long-term partnership. It would have seen the more experience Algerian group train Boko Haram members in hostage-taking, weapon-handling and bomb-making, and the Nigerian group kidnap “white skinned foreigners, especially expatriates”⁹⁸ in Nigeria (the N41 million are the same previously mentioned by Zenn as a cause of the feud between Sheaku and Abu Mohammad). As Zenn, the authors also recognise the key role played by al Barnawi in the establishment of the cooperation between AQIM and Boko Haram⁹⁹. As further evidence of the relation between the two groups, the authors point out the presence of Boko Haram fighters in Mali in 2012. Hundreds of member of the Nigerian formation reportedly attended AQIM and Ansar al-Din training camp close to Timbuktu as well as MUJAO one in Gao, and they fought alongside all three Islamist

⁹⁵ Elisabeth Pearson and Jacob Zenn (May 2014) – *Boko Haram: behind the violence* – Le Monde Diplomatique, cited in Guitta and Simcox (Jun 2014). <http://mondediplo.com/blogs/boko-haram-behind-the-violence>.

⁹⁶ United States Department of State – *Abubakar Shekau* – Rewards for Justice. https://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/abubakar_shekau.html.

⁹⁷ AFRICOM (Feb 2013) – *Advance Policy Questions for General David M. Rodriguez, U.S. Army Nominee for Commander*, U.S. Africa Command.

⁹⁸ Emmanuel Ogala (13 May 2012), *EXCLUSIVE: Boko Haram gets N40million donation from Algeria* – Premium Times, cited in Guitta and Simcox (Jun 2014). http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/5079-boko_haram_gets_n40million_donation_from_algeria.html.

⁹⁹ Jacob Zenn (27 Mar 2013) – *A Brief Look at Ansaru's Khalid al-Barnawi – AQIM's Bridge Into Northern Nigeria* – Militant Leadership Monitor, vol 4 issue 3, The Jamestown Foundation, cited in Guitta and Simcox (Jun 2014).

[http://mlm.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=40648&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=686](http://mlm.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=40648&tx_ttnews[backPid]=686).

groups¹⁰⁰. In this regard, Guitta and Simcox also report the addition of Boko Haram by the UN Security Council Al-Qa'ida Sanctions Committee to its sanctions list, which mentioned that “a number of Boko Haram members fought alongside Al-Qaida affiliated groups in Mali in 2012 and 2013 before returning to Nigeria with terrorist expertise”¹⁰¹. As regards Ansaru's connections to AQIM, the report cites the works of Zenn and of the International Crisis Group already presented.

Other publications that sustain the existence of links between Boko Haram and/or Ansaru and AQIM are: Moritz Hütte, Guido Steinberg and Annette Weber (Jun 2015) – *Boko Haram: Threat to Nigeria and Its Northern Neighbours*, in Guido Steinberg and Annette Weber (Jun 2015) – *Jihadism in Africa* – German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP); Yossef Bodansky (Feb 2015) – *The Boko Haram and Nigerian Jihadism* – ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security, issue n° 318, Institut für Strategie Politik Sicherheits und Wirtschaftsberatung (ISPSW); Egiegba Agbiboa (1 May 2014) – *Boko Haram and the Global Jihad: Do Not Think Jihad is Over. Rather Jihad Has Just Begun* – Australian Journal of International Affairs vol 68 iss 4, Routledge; Eli Karmon (Feb 2014) – *Boko Haram's International Reach* – Perspective on Terrorism, vol 8 iss 1, Terrorism Research Initiative; Hakim Onapajo, Ufo Okeke Uzodike and Ayo Whetho (5 Dec 2012) – *Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria: The international dimension* – South African Journal of International Affairs, vol 19 iss 3, Routledge; Forest (May 2012) – *Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria* – JSOU Report 12-5, Joint Special Operations University.

2. Positions contrary to the existence of relation between Boko Haram and AQIM

A few analysts maintain an opposing position or a very sceptical one about the existence of a relation between Boko Haram or its splinter group and AQIM.

¹⁰⁰ David Blair (11 Feb 2013) – *Timbuktu: al-Qaeda's terrorist training academy in the Mali desert* – The Telegraph and Drew Hinshaw (1 Feb 2013) – *Timbuktu training site shows terrorists' reach* – The Wall Street Journal, cited in Guitta and Simcox (Jun 2014).

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/mali/9860822/Timbuktu-al-Qaedas-terrorist-training-academy-in-the-Mali-desert.html>; <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323926104578278030474477210>.

¹⁰¹ Security Council Press Release, (22 May 2014) – *Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds Boko Haram To Its Sanctions List* – United Nations.

<http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11410.doc.htm>.

One of them is Emilie Oftedal, who wrote a report entitled “Boko Haram – an overview” for the Forsvarets Forskningsinstitutt (FFI) (Norwegian Defence Research Establishment) in May 2013. In the section dedicated to ideology, on one hand, Oftedal presents the Boko Haram’s statements indicating its willingness to associate with al-Qa’ida and globally oriented militant Islamists. She cites Boko Haram’s manifesto made available to Vanguard on August 9, 2009 in which it associated itself with al-Qa’ida and expressed its willingness to carry out Bin Laden’s commands in Nigeria¹⁰². She also cites the 2012 interview by Abu Qaqa, in which he confirms Boko Haram’s connections to al-Qa’ida and the mutual assistance they provided to each other, as they were fighting for the same goal, an Islamic state¹⁰³. Then she mentions Shekau’s statements containing anti-American rhetoric, like the July 2010 and November 29, 2012 ones¹⁰⁴. In the November 29, 2012, video Shekau also expressed his group’s solidarity with al-Qa’ida-affiliates in various areas of the world and called for fellow fighters to continue their jihad on all battlefronts¹⁰⁵. Finally, she points out the similarities between Boko Haram’s operational methods and al-Qa’ida ones, in particular suicide attacks and the publication of martyrdom videos, tactics unknown in Nigeria before 2011¹⁰⁶. On the other hand, she notes that only one of Boko Haram attacks was directed against an international target, the UN suicide bombing in 2011, underlining that “if the group’s ideology had been dominantly anti-Western, it would have been entirely within the group’s capabilities to find and attack Western targets such as embassies and employees of international companies”¹⁰⁷. In addition, she states that Boko Haram is mainly focused on the fight against Nigerian authorities and concerned with local grievances and its statements are mostly

¹⁰² Abayomi (14 Aug 2009), cited in Emilie Oftedal (31 May 2013) – *Boko Haram – an overview* – Report 2013/01680, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment – Forsvarets Forskningsinstitutt (FFI).

¹⁰³ Vanguard (24 Nov 2011), cited in Oftedal (May 2013).

¹⁰⁴ Jacob Zenn (31 Jan 2012) – *Abu Shekau Issues Video Message to Nigerian President* – Militant Leadership Monitor, vol 3 iss 1, The Jamestown Foundation; John Campbell (3 Dec 2012), *Nigerian Terrorist Threatens the United States*, Africa in Transition John Campbell Blog, Council of Foreign Relations, cited in Oftedal (May 2013).

[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=38946&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=38946&no_cache=1); <http://blogs.cfr.org/campbell/2012/12/03/nigerian-terrorist-threatens-the-united-states>.

¹⁰⁵ Tim Cocks (30 Nov 2012) – *Nigeria Boko Haram leader urges global jihad in video* – Reuters.com, cited in Oftedal (May 2013).

<http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-nigeria-bokoharam-idUKBRE8AT0S020121130>.

¹⁰⁶ David Cook (23 Jan 2012) – *Boko Haram and the Threat to the Secular Nigerian State* – e-International Relations, cited in Oftedal (May 2013). <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/01/23/boko-haram-and-the-threat-to-the-secular-nigerian-state>.

¹⁰⁷ Oftedal (May 2013), pp. 21-22.

made in the local Hausa language. She interprets this as an indication that Boko Haram does not primarily seek an international audience. In another section dedicated to Boko Haram's leaders, she hints at Kamar and al-Barnawi reported links to AQIM and Nur's ones to al-Shabaab. Then she directly addresses the theme of Boko Haram's connection to AQIM, listing the main indications that such link exists. Among them there are:

- the November 2011 report by the US House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, which admitted the possibility that Boko Haram could coordinate on a rhetorical and operational level with AQIM and Al Shabaab¹⁰⁸.
- Droukdel's offer of assistance to Boko Haram in 2010¹⁰⁹. In October 2010, AQIM's media arm published a statement attributed to Boko Haram, which is cited by analysts as the first time AQIM ever disseminated an official message from another group¹¹⁰.
- The posters with AQIM signature found on October 21, 2010, on key road intersections in northern Nigeria warning against assisting the police in catching members of the group¹¹¹.
- November 2011 Abu Qaqa phone conference with local journalists, in which he said that the group had links with al-Qa'ida¹¹² and his interview with the UK newspaper The Guardian in January 2012 in which he said that Boko Haram's leader had travelled to Saudi Arabia and met al-Qa'ida's ones there¹¹³.
- December 2011 report by UN assessment mission on the impact of the Libyan crisis on the Sahel region, which reported Boko Haram was active in Niger, had established links with AQIM, and that some of its mem-

¹⁰⁸ Patrick Meehan and Jackie Speier (30 Nov 2011) – *Boko Haram – Emerging Threat to the U.S. Homeland* – Report, United States House of Representatives, Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, cited in Oftedal (May 2013).

¹⁰⁹ Lauren Ploch (30 Nov 2011) – *Statement before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence* – Hearing: Boko Haram: Emerging Threat to the U.S. Homeland, cited in Oftedal (May 2013).

¹¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹¹ Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism – Chapter 2. Country Reports: Africa Overview – U.S. Country Reports on Terrorism 2010, cited in Oftedal (May 2013). <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2010/170254.htm>.

¹¹² Vanguard (24 Nov 2011), cited in Oftedal (May 2013).

¹¹³ Monica Mark (27 Jan 2012) – *Boko Haram vows to fight until Nigeria establishes sharia law* – The Guardian, cited in Oftedal (May 2013). <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/27/boko-haram-nigeria-sharia-law>.

bers had received training in AQIM camps in Mali during the summer of 2011¹¹⁴.

- Boko Haram fighters' presence in Mali reported starting from April 2012 by local media.
- June 2012 declaration by Niger's president Mahamadou Issoufou that Niger had evidence that Boko Haram was running training camps in Gao, Mali¹¹⁵.
- June 2012 declaration by the Nigerian Air Chief Marshal, Oluseyi Petinrin that Boko Haram had ties to AQIM; it was the first time a Nigerian top security official made such links in public¹¹⁶.
- The admission in June 2012 by Mohammed Suleiman Ashafa, accused by the Federal Government of Nigeria of being a middleman between Boko Haram and al-Qa'ida, of having facilitated the training of several members of Boko Haram in the Sahel¹¹⁷.
- The declaration by General Carter Ham, head of the US military's Africa Command, in July 2012 that there were signs that Boko Haram, al-Shabaab and AQIM were increasingly coordinating their activities and likely sharing funds, training and explosive materials¹¹⁸.

Oftedal also adds that some analysts consider the quickly evolving tactics and weapons used by Boko Haram as an indication that the group has ties to other terrorist groups¹¹⁹.

However, she affirms that "although there are many indications on some levels of affiliation between Boko Haram and regional or international terrorist groups, some of the information regarding outside links should be viewed

¹¹⁴ United Nations Security Council (January 18, 2012) – *Report of the assessment mission on the impact of the Libyan crisis on the Sahel region*, cited in Oftedal (May 2013).

¹¹⁵ Reuters (7 Jun 2012) – *Mali: Leader Warns of Jihadi Camps* – The New York Times, cited in Oftedal (May 2013). http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/08/world/africa/niger-president-warns-of-jihadi-camps-in-mali.html?_r=0.

¹¹⁶ Ola Awoniyi (23 Feb 2012) – *Nigeria defence chief says Boko Haram has ties to Al-Qaeda* – AFP, cited in Oftedal (May 2013). <https://www.modernghana.com/news/379818/1/nigeria-defence-chief-says-boko-haram-has-ties-to-.html>.

¹¹⁷ Elena Mizrokhi (16 Apr 2012) – *Nigeria's Boko Haram and Sahel Insecurity* – Geopoliticalmonitor, cited in Oftedal (May 2013). <http://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/nigerias-boko-haram-and-sahel-insecurity-4663>.

¹¹⁸ David Smith (26 Jun 2012) – *Africa's Islamist militants 'co-ordinate efforts in threat to continent's security'* – The Guardian, cited in Oftedal (May 2013). <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/26/africa-islamist-militants-coordinating-threat>.

¹¹⁹ Scott Stewart (26 Jan 2012) – *Nigeria's Boko Haram Militants Remain a Regional Threat* – Security Weekly, Stratfor. <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/nigerias-boko-haram-militants-remain-regional-threat>.

with sound scepticism”¹²⁰. She argues that the advancement in the tactics used by the group “does not necessarily mean that Boko Haram has trained in jihadist training camps and obtained support from Islamist groups outside Nigeria”, as “there are experienced militants within the country who may have been paid to teach Boko Haram tactics and bomb-making skills”¹²¹ and numerous manuals and teaching videos are available online. Moreover, both Boko Haram and security officials in the region could have an interest in exaggerating the extent of contact between various terrorist groups. Another argument provided by Oftedal is that Boko Haram’s statements and propaganda focus mostly on national issues, which indicates that the group was not part of a global jihadist movement yet. She further reiterates that Boko Haram has issued most of its statements via YouTube and local media, not through the media forums of al-Qa’ida, and that its statements are mostly in Hausa, a local language.

She concludes that “it seem relatively unlikely that Boko Haram has close operational connections to international terrorist groups, or that it will emerge as a major international terrorist threat in the near future”. However, she does not rule out the possibility of Boko Haram becoming more internationally oriented¹²².

The European Union Institute for Strategic Studies report n°19 (June 2014), entitled “Re-mapping the Sahel: transnational security challenges and international responses” and edited by Cristina Barrios and Tobias Koepf, presents another sceptical position about the existence of a relation between Boko Haram and AQIM. In the chapter dedicated to an overview of the various terrorist actors that are currently active in the Sahel, Tobias Koepf admits the possibility of links between Boko Haram and AQIM and the Sahelian groups, but he says that “these connections are hard to prove and still seem to be of a relatively moderate scale”¹²³. In another chapter, Kacper Rekawek discredits the narrative of “Afghanistan”, “Afghani-style terrorist statelets proliferating in Africa and threatening not only their immediate neighbours but also the West”, “[...] which leads the global public to perceive all politically (as well as economically) motivated armed attacks in the Sahel as jihadist terrorism”¹²⁴. According to the author, this is a misrepresentation. He recognises that the fact that AQIM, al-Shabaab and Boko Haram are all now active in different

¹²⁰ Oftedal (May 2013), p. 43.

¹²¹ Ibidem.

¹²² Oftedal (May 2013).

¹²³ Cristina Barrios and Tobias Koepf (June 2014) – *Re-mapping the Sahel: transnational security challenges and international responses* – Report n. 19, European Union Institute for Strategic Studies, p. 16.

¹²⁴ Barrios and Koepf (June 2014), p. 20.

parts of Africa can give the impression of an “arc of terrorism”. He adds that this theory seems to be reinforced by the fact that the aforementioned organisations appear to be converging in the Sahel with AQIM (plus MUJAO in Mali and the other affiliated groups) forming the northern and western flanks of the “arc of terrorism”, and Boko Haram (and Ansaru) and al-Shabaab the southern and eastern flanks. Moreover, the joining of forces of AQIM and other allied jihadist groups and their achieved control of northern Mali in 2012 could have further give credit to the Afrighanistan narrative. However, according to the author, “the jihadists’ failure to hold northern Mali and establish a permanent bridgehead for their future conquests in the Sahel region speaks volumes about the inability of the Africa-based terrorist organisations to successfully coordinate their actions and challenge the global order with the establishment of viable jihadi statelets forming the backbone of [...] an arc of instability”¹²⁵. “The AQIM-Boko Haram encounter, however, failed to unite and ignite the African ‘arc of terrorism’ as the logistical, ideological, linguistic and cultural obstacles and differences between the terrorist universes of the two organisations proved too great to be overcome”¹²⁶. The author states that while AQIM ran northern Mali, it is possible that it interacted with Boko Haram, especially with its splinter group Ansaru, which was more internationally oriented; however, it was not a strong relation and definitely not an alliance, which was more an aspiration than a reality. The report concludes that “essentially they are regional, quasi-guerrilla, militant organisations opportunistically using the tactic of terrorism”¹²⁷ to take advantage of events and unstable socio-political and economic conditions in their “base” country and neighbouring ones. Finally, AQIM and Boko Haram “should be perceived as lone enterprises with relatively little operational, advisory or financial input from al-Qaeda”¹²⁸.

Marc-Antoine Pérouse De Montclos, a professor at the French Institute of Geopolitics in the University of Paris 8 and at the Institut d’études politiques de Paris (IEP), a researcher at the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD) and a specialist on armed conflicts in Africa south of the Sahara, maintains an in-between, cautious position. He affirms that there were contacts between AQIM and Boko Haram, but they were limited and so was the cooperation between the two, which regarded only certain areas. In two of its most recent works, he disputes the existence of ties between Boko Haram and AQC saying that a strategic alliance with Saudi Salafi groups is doubtful

¹²⁵ Barrios and Koepl (June 2014), p. 21.

¹²⁶ Barrios and Koepl (June 2014), p. 22.

¹²⁷ Barrios and Koepl (June 2014), p. 23.

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*.

because the doctrine of Yusuf does not fit the Wahhabi model and no Nigerians are known to have fought with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in the 1990s¹²⁹. He adds that Nigerian courts never proved that Yusuf received funding from Saudi extremists and they released Mallam Muhammad Ashafa, arrested in 2006 with the accusation of being a middleman between the Nigerian sect and AQIC in charge of sending recruits to al-Qa'ida training camps in Mauritania, Mali and in Niger. According to the author, the alleged presence of some Nigerians fighting with AQIM in Mali did not prove that they were sent by Shekau in order to extend and coordinate various attacks in the region; moreover evidence of their nationality and their affiliation to Boko Haram remained weak. The statement supporting Osama bin Laden in Boko Haram's manifesto of 2009 did not mean the group would destabilise Nigeria under the supervision of Al-Qa'ida. On the contrary, the extortion of local businessmen and the multiple armed robberies since 2011 show that it continued relying on domestic funding. Moreover, De Montclos does not see Boko Haram operating outside Nigeria as evidence of its links with foreign groups; he affirms that it was international from the beginning, since it operated from a region with porous borders. If on one hand, De Montclos admits that a purely tactical cooperation between Boko Haram and foreign jihadist groups was very likely, more specifically, it would have regarded the training of fighters and the supply of weapons¹³⁰, on the other hand he says that "this does not mean coordination or even friendly cooperation". He adds that the French Army did not report traces of Boko Haram during Operation Serval in northern Mali in 2013. Moreover, he affirms that Shekau never pledged allegiance to Al-Qa'ida, which disregarded the Nigerian formation. He goes on saying that the expressions of solidarity between Shekau and Droukdel in their statements do not prove much. If a Boko Haram message was released on AQIM's media platform, Al-Andalus, once in 2010, then there was no follow-up. As regards Ansaru, the author believes it was certainly more aligned with al-Qa'ida, its targets were more international and its original name was Al-Qa'ida in the Lands Beyond the Sahel, but its connection to AQIM remains hard to prove and cannot be confirmed. He concludes that Boko Ha-

¹²⁹ Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (Sep 2014) – *Nigeria's interminable insurgency? Addressing the Boko Haram Crisis* – Chatam House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs; Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (2014) – *Boko Haram and politics: from insurgency to terrorism*, in Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (2014) – *Boko Haram: Islamism, politics, security and the state in Nigeria* – West African Politics and Society Series, vol. 2, African Studies Centre (ASC)/Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique (IFRA).

¹³⁰ De Montclos (2014).

ram grew out of confrontation with the Nigerian state and remained strongly connected to its domestic context¹³¹.

3. Conclusion

An extensive research in open sources showed that the majority of the analysts and institutes of research and think tanks agree that there were ties between Boko Haram and AQIM between 2009 and 2014, that is between the emergence of the Nigerian formation as a jihadist fighting group and its proclamation of a caliphate in the areas under its control. It also showed that the majority of them also agree that the nature of the relation involved training of the fighters, exchange of weapons and, to a lesser extent, funding. Some of them believe that a connection existed, but only between Boko Haram's splinter group Ansaru and AQIM and not the main Nigerian fighting group. A few of them remain sceptic about the existence of such a relation stating that the arguments in support of such a theory are not enough to confirm it.

¹³¹ De Montclos (Sep 2014).

La Rivista semestrale *Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società* intende la *Sicurezza* come una condizione che risulta dallo stabilizzarsi e dal mantenersi di misure proattive capaci di promuovere il benessere e la qualità della vita dei cittadini e la vitalità democratica delle istituzioni; affronta il fenomeno del *Terrorismo* come un processo complesso, di lungo periodo, che affonda le sue radici nelle dimensioni culturale, religiosa, politica ed economica che caratterizzano i sistemi sociali; propone alla *Società* – quella degli studiosi e degli operatori e quella ampia di cittadini e istituzioni – strumenti di comprensione, analisi e scenari di tali fenomeni e indirizzi di gestione delle crisi.

Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società si avvale dei contributi di studiosi, policy maker, analisti, operatori della sicurezza e dei media interessati all'ambito della sicurezza, del terrorismo e del crisis management. Essa si rivolge a tutti coloro che operano in tali settori, volendo rappresentare un momento di confronto partecipativo e aperto al dibattito.

La rivista ospita contributi in più lingue, preferendo l'italiano e l'inglese, per ciascuno dei quali è pubblicato un Executive Summary in entrambe le lingue. La redazione sollecita particolarmente contributi interdisciplinari, commenti, analisi e ricerche attenti alle principali tendenze provenienti dal mondo delle pratiche.

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