Al-Qa‘ida’s West African Advance: Nigeria’s Boko Haram, Mali’s Touareg, and the Spread of Salafi Jihadism

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In its escalating war on the Nigerian state, the al-Qa‘ida-affiliated, militant organization Boko Haram has killed over 900 people during the past two years. The outbreak of a Touareg separatist rebellion in Mali in January 2012, which now has swept across two-thirds of the country, carries the potential of linking North Africa’s al-Qa‘ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), via Mali and Niger, to Nigeria’s Boko Haram to form a nexus of Salafi jihadist militancy across West Africa. The development of al-Qa‘ida’s new African map does not depend so much on the ability of the organization to “Africanize,” but rather on the next phase of a decades-long process of the delegitimization of local Islamic identity in northern Nigeria and in neighboring countries. This delocalization of Islamic identity makes those Muslims who accept such a discourse more amenable to al-Qa‘ida’s global Salafi Islamist agenda. The continuing expansion of Boko Haram activity across northern Nigeria raises concern over the spread of Islamic extremism to Nigeria’s neighbors in the region. Al-Qa‘ida’s involvement in the Touareg insurgency creates the political opportunity to transform northern Mali into an al-Qa‘ida-affiliated Islamist stronghold by emulating and building upon Boko Haram’s example of creating a trans-ethnic, Salafi Islamist orientation in northern Nigeria.

Boko Haram: The Development of Salafi Jihadism in Northern Nigeria

Boko Haram originated in Yobe and Borno, two of northern Nigeria’s twelve Muslim-majority states. Unlike the ten Muslim-majority states where Hausa are the predominant ethnic group, Yobe and Borno are home to the Kanuri, having been part of the great medieval Kanuri empire of Bornu. Prior to Nigerian independence in 1960, a pan-Kanuri nationalist movement based in Borno sought to assert Kanuri interests as part the broader the anti-colonial struggle.
The movement's maximalists called for a “Greater Kanowra,” an approximately 534,460 km² territory that included Cameroon's Extreme North Region [Région de l'Extrême-Nord] Niger's Departments of Zinder and Diffa, and the prefectures of Lac and Kanem in Chad. Today, this greater Kanuri region—Northeastern Nigeria, Northern Cameroon, Southeastern Niger, and Southwestern Chad—constitutes the extended base of activity of Boko Haram. The Kanuri regions of Chad provide the group with a corridor to Sudan and from there to ash-Shabaab in Somalia. Similarly, the Kanuri regions of Niger provide Boko Haram with a northern corridor to the Touareg region of Niger and the adjacent Touareg regions of Mali, southern Libya, and Algeria. While Boko Haram networks revived an old pre-colonial map rooted in Kanuri ethnic identity, Boko Haram does not represent a movement to redress latent ethno-nationalist grievances through religious revival. Boko Haram's Salafi discourse represents the transformation of both ethno-nationalist aspiration and traditional religious revival. Indeed, Boko Haram represents a process of replacing the values rooted in local African Muslim traditions with the Salafi values purveyed by al-Qa‘ida’s global jihadist discourse. As a consequence, Boko Haram has brought together elements from various Muslim ethnic groups—alienated Kanuri, disaffected Hausa, beleaguered Fulani—into a pan-Islamic movement.

Yobe and Borno, like northern Nigeria’s other states, are already administered in accordance with some form of Islamic law. Under the banner of Islamist reform during the 1980s and 1990s, the urban Hausa elite sought to distance themselves from the Sufi-inspired, traditional African Islam of the countryside. Many of the upwardly mobile merchant class among the Hausa and the “Hausa-ized” Kanuri embraced a Saudi-oriented, Wahhabi form of Islam. Boko Haram arose in conscious opposition to this class, particularly the political elite that had emerged from it. The organization's name, Boko Haram, literally means “Book Forbidden.” The word “Boko,” derived from the English word “book,” refers specifically to Western education and, by extension, Western culture. It also has resonance with the word “Boka,” which, in the Hausa and Kanuri languages, means a pagan sorcerer or soothsayer, therefore intimating that Western education and culture is intrinsically un-Islamic. The organization’s name is indicative of the bidding games over Islamic authenticity that undergird the Salafi discourse appropriated by the Kanuri and disaffected Hausa against an already Islamized elite, resented for the prevalence of corruption and white-collar crime. Boko Haram further impugns the political elites of northern Nigeria for their cooperation with the Christian political leaders of southern Nigeria within the national framework of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Boko Haram developed in the immediate post-9/11 environment wherein long-standing local conflicts, both intra-Muslim and Muslim–Christian, were recast
within the narrative framework of global jihad.\textsuperscript{10} The group known today as Boko Haram emerged from a movement known as the Yobe Taliban. This movement coalesced and made its headquarters in an isolated region of the Kanuri-majority state of Yobe, approximately seventy kilometers from the state capital Danmaturu. Its members modeled themselves on al-Qa’ida and the Taliban, consciously imitating their dress and affect. The movement claimed that “true Shari’ah” had not been implemented in Nigeria’s twelve northern states. After conflicts between members of the movement and local villagers, the Yobe State Council ordered the group to leave within three days. The group transferred its base of operations to Kannama, a remote location deep within Kanuri territory, seven kilometers away from the border with Niger. Its members called their new base “Afghanistan” and henceforth were generally known as the “Taliban” of Yobe.\textsuperscript{11}

The forced relocation of the Yobe Taliban confirmed the group’s view that it was locked in an irreconcilable conflict with local and state governments in northern Nigeria that, in the Yobe Talibans’ view, maintained an un-Islamic social and political order. The educated elites who managed the state apparatus thus became legitimate targets of jihadist violence. Guided by this view, and motivated by the desire for revenge, the Yobe Taliban launched a coordinated, retaliatory attack on December 24, 2003. The group attacked the residences of local government heads, regional officials, and the divisional police. That attack marked the beginning of what would become Boko Haram’s insurgent campaign against the state.\textsuperscript{12}

It is important to note that the attack was carried out on Christmas Eve. Along with Muslim festival days, Christmas is an officially recognized public holiday in Nigeria. The day of the attack may have been chosen for its symbolic value or for the tactical ease of operation the holiday period afforded. While the Christian communities located in the predominantly Muslim states of northern Nigeria did not initially constitute the primary target of the Yobe Taliban’s jihadist violence, extreme hostility to the Christian presence seems to have been a strong tendency within the movement.\textsuperscript{13} Those who favored focusing their militancy against Christian communities were aided by the flare-up in inter-ethnic violence in Nigeria’s volatile Plateau state.

The capital of the Plateau state, Jos, which is the largest city bordering Nigeria’s twelve Shari’ah-run states, has gained international notoriety for the wave of murderous violence between Muslim Fulani and Christian Berom that began in 2010.\textsuperscript{14} However, it was the outbreak of Muslim–Christian violence in the Plateau state town of Yelwa, five months after the Yobe Taliban’s Christmas Eve attack in 2003, that first transformed the organization. In May 2004, gangs from among the farming communities of the Christian Tarok ethnic group attacked Muslim Fulani herdsman because the Fulani allowed their herds to graze on land and
drink water that the Tarok claimed belonged to them. Of the 630 persons killed in the ensuing violence, approximately two-thirds were Fulani. Casting these events as a religious conflict, the Yobe Taliban attacked Christian communities in Kano State, north of the Plateau State in the very heart of Muslim northern Nigeria. In the two-day carnage, several hundred Christians were killed. Since then, Boko Haram units have participated repeatedly in inter-religious conflict in the Plateau state, assisting local Muslim populations, often Fulani, and expanding the conflict into the neighboring states of Bauchi and Gombe (each located between Yobe and the Plateau state). Boko Haram’s engagement in local inter-ethnic violence has enabled the organization to expand beyond its initial ethnic and geographical base. The Fulani represent another trans-national ethnic network for al-Qa’ida to exploit should Boko Haram be able to recast economic rivalries and violence by non-Muslim rivals in Nigeria within the narrative framework of global jihad. As the world’s largest nomadic ethnic group, the Fulani are spread across the western Sahel, constituting 17 percent of the population of Mali and 8 percent of the population of Niger. While a Boko Haram alliance with the Salafi factions within the Touareg insurgency is the most immediate concern, widespread participation of Fulani in Boko Haram in Nigeria would present al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb with the opportunity to develop support among segments of Mali’s Fulani population.

The Emerging Trans-Saharan Nexus: Early Boko Haram–AQIM Connections

Although first known as Taliban and now as Boko Haram, the members of the Nigerian militant organization officially referred to themselves as Jama’atul Ahl as-Sunnah lidaawa wal Jihad [The Group of the People of the Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad]. In a Salafi context, the first part of the group’s name, “Ahl as-Sunnah,” reveals the movement’s intention to represent genuine Sunni practice. The group’s name bears a remarkable resemblance to that of the North African militant organization Jama’atul Salafiyyatu lida’wa wal-Qital [The Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat] founded in 1998 during the last phase of the Algerian Civil War. Known in French as the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC), the Algerian-based group operated widely in the trans-Sahara region, including Mauritania, Mali, and Niger. The development of GSPC’s trans-Sahara orientation reflected the ascendance of a younger generation of jihadists led by Abdel Malek Droukdel. Assuming the GSPC leadership in the summer of 2004, Droukdel began forging stronger links with al-Qa’ida, particularly Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi’s al-Qa’ida in Iraq. By 2005, Algerians constituted the largest group of foreign fighters in Iraq and accounted for 20 percent of the total number of fighters.
In September 2006, on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Al-Qaeda’s then-deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri released an internet video in which he announced a “blessed union” between al-Qa’ida and the GSPC. Representing the re-orientation of Algerian militancy to global jihad, al-Zawahiri declared that the incorporation of the GSPC into al-Qa’ida would “be a thorn in the necks of the American and French crusaders and their allies ...” While the GSPC had come around fully to accepting al-Qa’ida’s position on having to combat the “Far Enemy”—the US and France—al-Qa’ida expected the GSPC to manage operations against this enemy in the trans-Sahara as well as the “Near Enemies”—the national governments of the region. As then-Moroccan Interior Minister Chakib Benmoussa summarized al-Zawahiri’s announcement, “Al-Qa’ida has delegated to the GSPC the responsibility of coordinating its operations in the Maghreb region. Al-Qa’ida’s objective is to have a base in the region of the Sahel.” In January 2007, the GSPC officially changed its name to al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb and began to carry out a series of operations over the next several years in Mauritania, Mali, and Niger.

The transformation of the GSPC into AQIM under the leadership of Droukdel coincides with the evolution of the Yobe Taliban under the leadership of Muhammad Yusuf into the al-Qa’ida-affiliated Boko Haram. Serving as the group’s spiritual leader as well as military commander, Yusuf shifted its focus to Borno and established the organization’s headquarters in a mosque complex in the state capital of Maiduguri. Yusuf called his mosque the Ibn Taimiyya Masjid after the medieval Islamic scholar who virulently condemned Shia, Sufis, and the ruling Sunni elite. He did so in his strident call for jihad to restore what he considered to be the pristine Islam of the early Islamic community. By naming his mosque after one of the Islamic scholars most often cited by Salafi jihadists, Yusuf signaled his hostility to the ruling Muslim elite as well as to traditional Nigerian Islam. With the assistance of one of his chief deputies, Abubakar Shekau (Boko Haram’s current leader), Yusuf oversaw the construction of an alternative society. Boko Haram instituted an executive cabinet and a shura council. The organization managed farmland and engaged in micro-financing. Yusuf functioned as chief adjudicator of this miniature state-within-a-state. The group appointed amirs in various locations across the area, including in the Kanuri regions of Niger and Chad, to oversee local activities.

Disaffected youth from elite families in Yobe and Borno either joined the movement or provide financial support. Recordings of Yusuf’s preaching were widely distributed across the northeastern states of Nigeria, and the area of operations for Boko Haram’s militancy extended to the ethnically mixed states of Kano and Bauchi. Despite multiple arrests in these states and in Borno, Yusuf always returned unimpeded to Maiduguri. His ability to evade detention fueled
suspicion that members of the political elite had covertly joined Boko Haram or were sympathetic to the organization.

The organization itself maintained a depth of support in the greater Kanuri region. In the wake of the 2003 Christmas Eve attack, Boko Haram engaged in a low-intensity jihad against governmental institutions in at least five Nigerian states. Boko Haram’s escalation of its campaign against the state governments was accompanied by increased attacks on the Christian minority communities. Each time the organization faced reprisal operations conducted by police and army forces, the surviving Boko Haram militants would flee to safe havens in Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. In 2009, Boko Haram began preparing for a widespread and extensive campaign to topple Nigerian state governments. The organization began its campaign by targeting the ethnically mixed state of Bauchi in late July 2009. The Bauchi state governor preemptively arrested several Boko Haram leaders, claiming that the group was planning to take over the state capital of Bauchi City. The following day Boko Haram instigated Muslim–Christian violence in Bauchi City, and several hundred Boko Haram militants attacked the police station in which their comrades were being held. More than fifty people died in the violence and approximately 100 Boko Haram militants were arrested. A defiant Yusuf made plain Boko Haram’s intentions in an interview with Nigeria’s *Daily Trust* newspaper, “Democracy and the current system of education must change, otherwise this war that has yet to start will continue for a long time.”

On July 30, 2009, following Yusuf’s declaration, army units stormed Boko Haram’s headquarters in Maiduguri. Yusuf was captured at his father-in-law’s house and later shot dead while in police custody. Approximately 800 people died in the violence. The police reported losing twenty-eight men. It is estimated that approximately 500 Boko Haram militants were killed. The surviving top echelon of the organization, including Abubakar Shekau, who assumed the leadership of Boko Haram, fled to Niger and Chad. As Boko Haram regrouped in these locations, it began mobilizing its members and supporters through the distribution of martyrdom videos. This form of mobilization was one of the first indications of al-Qa’ida’s augmentation of Boko Haram’s capabilities as it re-established itself in exile. In January 2010, AQIM head Droukdel publically offered to train and arm Nigerian volunteers to wage jihad against Christian Nigerians who were engaged in a “crusade” against Muslims. Droukdel and the AQIM *shura* had already offered Shekau assistance in rebuilding Boko Haram. The Boko Haram escapees in Niger were assisted by AQIM’s south Saharan *katiba* [brigade] commanded by Abdelhamid Abu Zeid.
When Boko Haram launched its renewed jihad in northern Nigeria in the autumn of 2010, the influence of AQIM was clear. It began in September 2010 by attacking prisons in Bauchi state to free about 100 captive Boko Haram militants. In October, Boko Haram assassinated Bashir Kashara, an Islamist cleric in Maiduguri who criticized its ideology in his weekly Islam program on Borno state radio. The group also targeted northern Nigeria’s ruling party, the conservative All Nigeria People’s Party (ANPP). Between October 2010 and the outbreak of the Libyan civil war in March 2011, Boko Haram waged a campaign of continual attacks, killing antithetical Muslim clerics, Christian ministers, and several key ANPP figures, including the party’s regional vice-chairman, its gubernatorial candidate for Borno state, and the ANPP youth leader in Borno. On April 18, 2011, Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian Ijaw from Nigeria’s southern coast, was declared the winner of Nigeria’s presidential elections. Jonathan’s election to the presidency was controversial for many Nigerian Muslims who regarded it as a violation of Nigeria’s practice of alternating the office of the presidency between a Christian and a Muslim. Boko Haram sought to exploit this dissatisfaction by directly attacking the Nigerian federal government. On August 18, 2011, Boko Haram bombed the UN headquarters in the Nigerian capital of Abuja. Shortly thereafter, a new wave of Muslims–Christian fighting broke out in the Plateau state.

In an audiotape message in 2003, al-Qa’ida leader Osama bin-Laden identified Nigeria as one of the six Muslim countries “ripe for liberation.” As of late August 2011, it appeared that al-Qa’ida had succeeded in establishing a presence within Nigeria to achieve this aim. However, events in Nigeria were quickly overshadowed by the Libyan rebels’ triumph in the battle for Tripoli and their seizure of Muammar Qadhafi’s compound in the Libyan capital on August 23, 2011. In early September, while Libya’s interim rulers met with world leaders in Paris to discuss Libya’s post-Qadhafi future, heavily armed convoys began crossing the southern Libyan desert into Niger carrying senior Touareg officers from Qadhafi’s security forces, as well as Touareg mercenaries. In October 2012, as Libyan rebels forces advanced on the last stronghold of Qadhafi support in his hometown of Sirte, thousands of Touareg streamed across the border into Niger’s Agadez region. The presence in Niger and Mali of heavily armed Touareg fighters, seasoned in desert combat, posed a grave danger to the stability of the two Sahel countries. The outbreak of the Touareg insurgency in Mali in mid-January 2012 presented AQIM with an opportunity to deepen its strategic relationship with Touareg populations in Mali and Niger. The intensification of Salafi Islamist sympathies among the Touareg would allow AQIM to penetrate further south and form a contiguous area of jihadist militancy with Boko Haram that would encompass most of West Africa.
The Critical Links: Niger and Mali

The six million Tamasheq-speaking Touareg are distributed across a wide desert and semi-desert territory spanning southern Algeria and Libya, northern Mali and Niger, and part of Burkina Faso. One of the Berber peoples, the Touareg’s traditional Islamic culture is heavily infused with practices deriving from a blend of Sufism and ancient Berber folk customs. According to AQIM’s Salafi outlook, such practices are un-Islamic. The jihadist co-optation of Touareg ethno-nationalist aspirations would therefore require a shift in identity among the Touareg themselves, similar to the process that has occurred in northern Nigeria and the greater Lake Chad Basin.

Prior to the current outbreak of hostilities in northern Mali, there have been three Touareg rebellions. The first (1963–64) was short lived and confined to Mali. The second (1990–95) was more sustained and widespread, involving Touareg independence movements in Niger as well as Mali. The third Touareg rebellion (2007–09) first erupted in Niger and then spread to Mali, with intense concurrent campaigns in the Nigerien and Malian theaters. The rebellion ended through a peace accord that was mediated by Libya, with peace talks occurring in Sirte. The negotiations were carried out under the auspices of Muammar Qadhafi, whose public call for the Touareg to cease hostilities during his visit to the Nigerien capital of Niamey initiated the peace process. Since the second Touareg rebellion, several Touareg rebels had remained in Libya and served in the Libyan military.

Niger

The Touareg constitute about 11 percent of Niger’s population and primarily reside in the Agadez region, the country’s arid northern hinterland in which Niger’s extensive uranium deposits are located. Niger is one of the world’s leading producers of uranium and one of its primary suppliers to France, which relies on nuclear energy for 78 percent of its electricity production. The 2009 peace accord reached between the Touareg rebels and the Hausa/Djerma-dominated national government in Niamey promised the Touareg a greater voice in Niger’s national politics as well as a greater share of Niger’s uranium income. The accord was challenged by AQIM’s kidnapping of seven employees of the French conglomerate Areva (five French nationals, one Togolese, and one Madagascan) at the company’s mining operation in Arlit on September 16, 2010. The kidnapping raised the long-held concern that Touareg ethno-nationalist grievances would be reframed within the global jihadist narrative. On January 21, 2011, this concern became more immediate when, ten days prior to the Niger’s national elections, Osama bin-Laden released an audiotape addressed to the people of France declaring that AQIM’s hostages would not be freed until France withdrew its troops from Afghanistan.
Bin-Laden’s statement came after French special forces had failed on January 8, 2011 to free two other French hostages who had been kidnapped in Niamey. Prior to the kidnapping of the Areva employees, AQIM had kidnapped a French national also in the Agadez region near Niger’s border with Mali. This earlier kidnapping likewise prompted a French rescue operation that failed.

The pattern of AQIM kidnappings, provoking joint French-Nigérien military operations in the Agadez region that are resented by some of the local Touareg population, served al-Qa’ida’s attempt to reframe Touareg grievances against the Nigérien state within the Salafi jihadist formulation of the “Far Enemy” and the “Near Enemy.” Non-Muslim France was cast as the “Far Enemy” and the officially secular Fifth Republic of Niger, dominated by Hausa and Djerma, with its post-colonial dependence on France as a rentier state, was portrayed as the “Near Enemy.” AQIM’s efforts garnered little support during Niger’s successful transition to democracy during 2010–2011. The influx of Touareg mercenaries and refugees from Libya in Autumn 2011 similarly did not produce an increase of sympathy for al-Qa’ida. This is in no small measure due to President Issoufou’s appointment of Brigi Rafini, a Touareg and native of Agadez, as prime minister of Niger on April 21, 2011, two weeks after Issoufou himself assumed office. In September 2011, four months prior to the outbreak of the new Touareg insurgency in Mali, President Issoufou appointed Rhissa ag Boula, a former leader of Touareg rebel factions during the second and third Touareg rebellions, to serve as one of his presidential advisers. On January 23, 2012, during the first week of Touareg violence in neighboring Mali, President Issoufou traveled to Arlit to inaugurate a two-day “Peace and Development” forum. There, he presented an initiative for new long-term programs for the development of the Agadez region and the reintegration of former Touareg rebels returning from Libya. President Issoufou’s initiative was made all the more poignant by the presence of Mohamed Anako, the veteran leader of the second Touareg rebellion, now serving as head of the Agadez regional council. Anako had appealed to the Malian Touareg “to prefer dialogue to the detriment of violence.”

AQIM’s attempt to recast the Touareg situation according to the Salafi paradigm ultimately can only succeed by portraying the Nigérien government as one that is not genuinely “Islamic.” Despite Niger’s success thus far in maintaining its national cohesion and developing a democratic civil society, Boko Haram’s cross-border militancy is a cause for serious concern. The current limited political opportunity for AQIM recruitment in Niger would greatly increase should Boko Haram succeed in delegitimizing the Nigérien government among a significant segment of the country’s Hausa and Kanuri populations living along the border with Nigeria.
Mali

In mid-January 2012, Touareg separatists began a military campaign in the Kidal region, Mali’s arid northeastern hinterland bordering the Arlit section of Agadez in Niger. The fighters belonged to the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azaouad (MNLA), the aim of which is to create an independent Touareg state called Azawad from the three northern Touareg regions of Mali—Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu. While the Touareg comprise about 10 percent of the Malian population, the vast desert and semi-desert region they claim constitutes approximately 66 percent of the territory of Mali. Many of the members of the MNLA served in Qadhafi’s armed forces. Experienced in desert combat and using weapons transported from Libya, the Touareg insurgents are reported to have very effectively employed a combination of machine gun-equipped four-wheel-drive vehicles, missiles, and mortars, forcing the Malian military into a series of retreats.37 After capturing all major cities and towns in Kidal, the MNLA militants took Gao and then Timbuktu in quick succession. With the MNLA controlling all three Malian regions, a territory comprising 819,928 km², its spokesman Mossa Ag Attaher formally declared the independence of Azawad on French Television on April 6, 2012.38

However, the MNLA appears to have lost control of a significant portion of its territory to its erstwhile ally the Islamist militant organization Ançar Dine [Defenders of the Religion].39 Led by Iyad ag Ghaly, a prominent leader from the second Touareg rebellion, Ançar Dine is linked to al-Qai’da particularly through ag Ghaly’s cousin, Hamada ag Hama, who leads a small AQIM faction. On March 21, 2012, Ançar Dine issued a statement to Agence France Presse that it was in control of Kidal’s major towns and had begun to administer Shar’i‘ah law.40 Ançar Dine spokesman Cheikh Ag Aoussa declared, “It is an obligation for us to fight for the implementation of Shar‘i ‘ah in Mali.” At the time of this writing, Ançar Dine, aided by AQIM elements, have driven the MNLA forces from Timbuktu. Arriving in approximately fifty vehicles, the combined Ançar Dine-AQIM forces under the leadership of ag Ghaly expelled the MNLA, burned the national flag of Azawad, and began to administer a Shar‘i ‘ah-run regime in the city. Promising to fight to the death against those advocating the creation of a democratic republic of Azawad, ag Ghaly told Timbuktu’s Muslim clerics that “he did not come for independence but for the application of Islamic law.”41 Quick to emphasize the Salafi nature of its struggle in contradistinction to the MNLA’s Touareg nationalist aspirations, Ançar Dine pointed out that the militants who conquered Timbuktu were a multi-ethnic force, including several Nigerians.42 Abu Zeid, the commander of AQIM’s southern katiba, who had been providing training to Boko Haram militants in Niger, met with ag Ghaly in Timbuktu.43 With the Touareg comprising only 10 percent of Timbuktu’s population, the MNLA enjoys little support among the majority of the
city’s residents. Without a credible alternative from Mali’s national government in Bamako, the Songhai and Fulani of Timbuktu and Gao may begin to view the multi-ethnic, Sufi Ançar Dine as a better alternative than the MNLA. Because of Boko Haram’s assistance to Fulani populations in Nigeria, the Fulani living along the Niger River between Timbuktu and Gao may prove more amenable to Ançar Dine. Some Nigerian militants have already been engaged by Ançar Dine to instruct segments of Timbuktu’s population in the Salafi practice of Islam.

Whither West Africa?

The independence of Azawad has not been internationally recognized. The democratically elected president of Mali was deposed by a military coup on March 22, 2012 on the pretext of his alleged incompetence in managing the counter-offensive against the Touareg insurgency. Creating a domestic political crisis and bringing about severe international sanctions, particularly from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Mali’s military junta agreed to restore civilian rule after the fall of Timbuktu to the insurgents. Concurrently, in Abijan, Ivory Coast, the military chiefs-of-staff of the ECOWAS nations began planning the creation of a 3,000-strong force to intervene in Mali. This military intervention, particularly if assisted by France, would enable al-Qa’ida to reframe the Touareg insurgency, especially its own participation, within its the global jihadist narrative of the “Near Enemy” and “Far Enemy.” If an ECOWAS intervention should prove to be insufficiently swift and decisive, Mali will become the cause célèbre for al-Qa’ida, potentially attracting jihadists from around the continent. Without Mali’s implementation of political and economic measures, akin to the measures adopted in Niger, to significantly address Touareg grievances and encourage their participation in the Malian state, the ungoverned spaces of Mali’s Touareg regions will serve as the base from which AQIM and Boko Haram will carry forward their project to create an integrated jihadist movement in West Africa.

Notes

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According to polling conducted by the Pew Research Center’s “Global Attitudes Project,” 49 percent of Nigerian Muslims held a favorable attitude toward al-Qa’ida. This was the highest percentage of the Muslim populations polled, including in Pakistan. “Osama Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda had been losing support in Muslim world,” Pew Global Attitudes Project, Pew Research Center, May 2, 2011, www.pewglobal.org/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-al-qaeda-had-been-losing-support-in-muslim-world.

Ronald Cohen, *The Kanuri of Bornu* (New York, 1967). See also the published works of Editha Platte, the most active researcher among the few scholars of Kanuri Studies in the world today.

Micha’el Tanchum, “Nigeria’s Boko Haram and Islamist Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin: The Emergence of a New Trans-Saharan Jihadist Nexus,” The Interdisciplinary Center, 11th Annual Conference—World Summit on Counter Terrorism, Herzliya, Israel, September 13, 2011.


Nigerian Muslims’ identification with Osama bin-Laden and al-Qa’ida’s struggle against the United States is perhaps best indicated by the rapid increase of Nigerian Muslim boys who were named Osama and the justifications for the name given by the parents. See “Osama baby craze hits Nigeria,” BBC News, January 3, 2002, www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/afrika/1741171.stm.


Gombe State was formed in 1996 by separating the territory from Bauchi State. Consisting primarily of savannah amenable to herding, most of the population of Gombe is Fulani.

See discussion in the section “Mali” further on in the text.

Filiu, op. cit., 5–6.


Ibid.

Thornberry and Levy, op. cit., 3–7

Muhammad Yusuf’s role prior to 2006 remains unclear. Yusuf seems to have been a charismatic Islamist preacher who in the immediate post-9/11 environment appealed to violent street youth in the region of Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state. According to Yossef Bodansky, “In the first half of 2002, Yusuf consolidated these groups [of violent street youth] into an organization called Boko Haram. The group was formally founded in Maiduguri . . .” Bodansky asserts that the original Boko Haram formation was the core of the Yobe Taliban (Bodansky, op. cit., 18). Although not mentioning Muhammad Yusuf, certain journalistic accounts claim the group in Kanamma had migrated from Maiduguru. See Abdullahi Bego, “‘Taliban’ of Nigeria: Who are they?” Weekly Trust News, January 3, 2004, www.nigeriamasterweb.com/TalibanOfNigeria.html.

Sani, op. cit.


Filiu, op. cit., 7. Filiu asserted that this “bombastic call triggered no reaction in Nigeria.” With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the scholarly consensus misread the significance of Boko Haram’s relationship with AQIM. However, Filiu did caution, “The fear that AQIM could achieve substantial inroads in Nigeria and, more generally, around the Gulf of Guinea, grew. This is why the regional threat must be assessed carefully.”

Bodansky, op. cit. ; Thornberry and Levy, op. cit., 7


Muslim politician Umaru Musa Yar’Adua was elected president of Nigeria and assumed office on May 29, 2007. On November 23, 2009, Yar’Adu left Nigeria for Saudi Arabia to receive treatment for pericarditis without transferring authority to then-Vice President Goodluck Jonathan. Eventually, on February 9, 2010, Nigeria’s Senate conferred upon Jonathan the authority to serve as “acting president.” The ailing Yar’Adua returned to Nigeria the following day and remained in the country in an incapacitated state until he died on May 5, 2010. Many Nigerian Muslims believe that Jonathan’s term as president therefore violates the convention of alternating the presidency between a Christian and a Muslim.


39 Literally, “The Helpers of the Religion.” This refers to the residents of Medina who assisted Muhammad and his companions when they fled from Mecca in 622 CE.

40 “Islamist fighters call for Sharia law in Mali,” Agence France Presse, March 13, 2012, news.yahoo.com/islamist-fighters-call-sharia-law-mali-144233731.html; Part of the thirteen-minute video that was aired by AFP can be viewed on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=OM1AyelRLP0.

41 Iyad ag Ghaly’s statement was reported to AFP by an eyewitness. Daniel De Serge, “La mythique Tombouctou sous le joug des islamistes,” Agence France Presse, April 3, 2012, www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jdr1MkVjNMgLrz80XY7gVFiFBlIA?docId=CNG.89cd0cc5c48b9aa643fe7e06ad17b83,b71.

42 Ibid.


44 Like Gao, the lingua franca of Timbuktu is Koyra Chiini, the language of Mali’s Songhai population that maintains a historic antagonism to the Touareg. Many Touareg were
expelled from the Timbuktu region during the second Touareg rebellion in the early 1990s.

45 De Serge, op. cit.

46 The ECOWAS brokered agreement included the lifting of ECOWAS sanctions against Mali and the granting of amnesty for all soldiers involved in the coup.


48 French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé announced that France is prepared to handle the logistics for the ECOWAS force. Ibid.