

The Islamic State Woos Jihadists in Africa but Faces Competition

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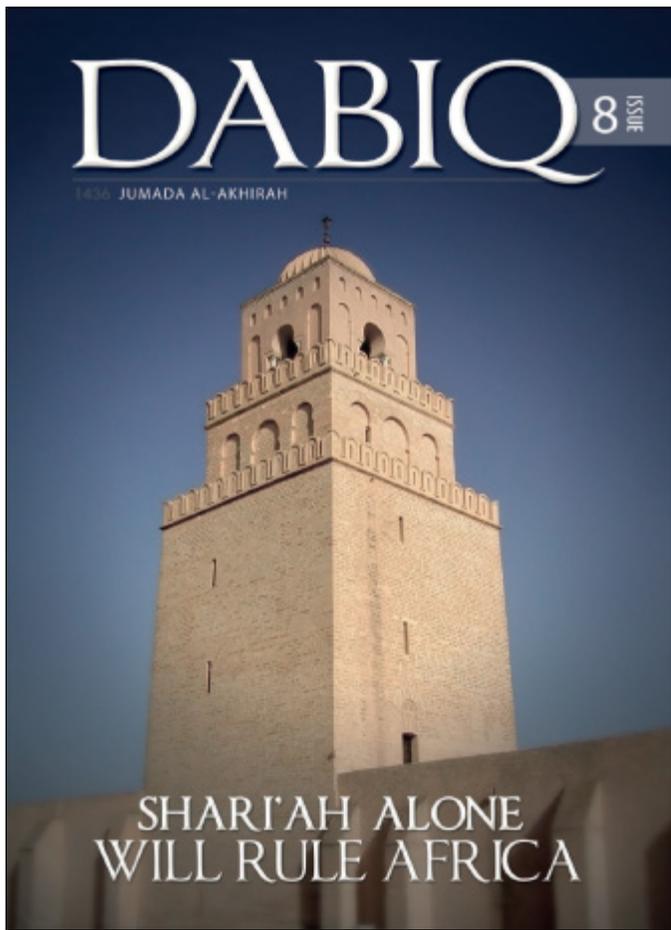
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In March 2015, the Islamic State sought to publicize its expansion into sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting in its English-language magazine, *Dabiq*, the pledge of allegiance made that month by Abubakar Shekau, leader of the Nigeria-based Salafi-jihadist group Boko Haram (see CRS Report R43558, [Nigeria's Boko Haram: Frequently Asked Questions](#), by Lauren Ploch Blanchard). The edition—"Sharia Alone Will Rule Africa"—described the alliance as a "new door" through which Muslims unable to travel to the Middle East might "migrate to the land of Islam" to wage jihad. Videos from other IS affiliates hailing Shekau's pledge emphasized the importance of the creation of a new Islamic State West Africa Province (*Wilayah Gharb Afriqiyyah*; aka ISWAP) to the organization. The alliance notionally joins [the world's two deadliest terrorist groups](#)—Boko Haram is attributed with more than 15,000 deaths in the past five years, including [more than 6,500 in 2015](#). The practical impact of the union, however, remains largely unclear.

Figure 1. The Cover of *Dabiq*, released March 2015



Branding itself as part of the Islamic State may provide Boko Haram with recruitment and fundraising opportunities, but it is geographically removed from the Islamic State's core territory, and the extent to which affiliation has facilitated operational ties remains in question. [Nigerians have been seen at IS camps](#) in Libya (along with fighters from other African countries), but there has yet to be a noticeable shift in the group's tactics or targeting. [Boko Haram's videos](#) have been the most tangible public evidence of IS collaboration—experts suggest that their improved quality in 2015 showed signs of IS expertise. Newer videos appear aimed at a more international audience and are more often delivered through social media and IS media outlets. It remains to be seen whether IS influence can help Boko Haram broaden its appeal within Nigeria's large Muslim population, or beyond.

Boko Haram's brutal tactics, which include beheadings and the use of [women and children as suicide bombers](#), predate the rise of the Islamic State, as does its routine [targeting of fellow Muslims](#), both Sunni and Shiite. Boko Haram's operations remain focused on the Lake Chad Basin area (the border area between Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger), and its narrative is [rooted in local grievances](#) as well as an [exclusivist interpretation of Islam](#). The alliance did not practically expand the territory of the Islamic State, given that regional military operations had, in the months prior to Shekau's pledge, reclaimed most of the area seized by Boko Haram in Nigeria in 2014.

Boko Haram has yet to shift toward a greater focus on international targets since its rebranding as ISWAP. Its most prominent attack on an international (non-regional) target occurred in 2011, when a suicide bomber attacked the U.N. building in Nigeria's capital, Abuja. The group has since conducted some smaller attacks, [primarily kidnappings](#), against foreign targets, but nothing on a similar scale. Some experts have attributed the planning for most of those incidents to [individuals with ties to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb](#) (AQIM). In March 2016, the head of U.S. Africa Command stated, "We are watching carefully for signs that the threat posed by Boko Haram to U.S. persons is growing as a result of the group's alignment with ISIL."

There is [uncertainty about the relationship](#) between the Islamic State, its affiliates in Libya, and other violent extremist groups operating in Northwest Africa, most notably some offshoots of AQIM. Elements of one Mali-based AQIM splinter faction, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA or MUJAO after its French acronym)

pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in May 2015. MUJWA had previously joined with another AQIM faction to form Al Murabitoun in 2013. Al Murabitoun leader Mokhtar bel Mokhtar, a former AQIM cell commander, publicly rejected the IS pledge and reaffirmed Al Murabitoun's loyalty to Al Qaeda.

Weak governance and security across large parts of Northwest Africa allow violent extremist groups to operate across borders, making it difficult to track groups, their leaders, and changes in affiliations. AQIM and Al Murabitoun may consider the Islamic State a rival for recruits, resources, and influence—some observers view a recent [spate of attacks against hotels](#) popular with foreigners in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Cote d'Ivoire as an attempt by AQIM and related groups to [reassert dominance](#) in the region. One U.S. commander contends there may be a direct relationship between IS affiliates in Libya and AQIM, but terrorism experts express [skepticism regarding IS-AQIM collaboration](#), arguing that their stated ideologies and tactics differ substantially.

The [competition for influence among African Salafi-jihadists](#) is evident in East Africa, where some factions of AQ affiliate Al Shabaab have proclaimed allegiance to the Islamic State and drawn a violent reaction from Al Shabaab's senior leadership, which has maintained its relationship with Al Qaeda. (Al Shabaab also has ties to the AQ affiliate in nearby Yemen.) IS media offices have repeatedly urged "mujahideen" in Somalia to join the Islamic State and have featured videos of ethnic Somalis in the organization. The Islamic State has drawn [recruits from the Somali diaspora](#) abroad, including in the United States, to fight in Syria and Iraq. Pledges to the Islamic State by two Al Shabaab commanders prompted a [deadly crackdown](#) in late 2015. Al Shabaab has nationalist roots and complex relationships with the clans in south-central Somalia. [Clan dynamics](#) have contributed to splits in the movement but may also prevent the Islamic State from making greater inroads in the country.

IS recruitment in Kenya and Sudan is of concern to regional authorities. Sudan is reportedly a [transit point](#) for militants traveling from the Middle East to Libya, and authorities acknowledge that more than 100 [Sudanese students](#) have left the country to join the Islamic State. Several Sudanese clerics are suspected of involvement in [IS recruitment networks](#). Some experts suggest that Kenya, long [susceptible to Salafi-jihadist recruitment](#), may provide fertile ground for the Islamic State to [expand its influence](#). In the near term, however, Al Shabaab remains the [more prominent threat](#) in the region.