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Report

Jama'atu Ansarul Musilimina Fi Biladis Sudan: Nigeria's Evolving Militant Group

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Introduction

The activities of militant Islamist sects in northern Nigeria is now a growing source of security concern to Western capitals. Hitherto driving much of the attention is the ramping up of violent attacks on diverse civilian and military targets in Nigeria by the *Jama'atu Ahlissunnah lidda'awati wal Jihad*, or Boko Haram, using such violent tactics like placement of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), targeted assassination, drive-by shooting and suicide bombing.

The rise of a new violent group by the name *Jama'atu Ansarul Musilimina Fi Biladis Sudan* (henceforth, *JAMBS*) or *Ansaru*, for short, has added another dimension to the landscape of violent extremism and terrorism unfolding largely in northern Nigeria. *JAMBS* is less well known than Boko Haram, but the nature and profile of its targets as well as its professed intentions makes it a sect to watch in upcoming days or months. Since its emergence, *JAMBS* has claimed responsibility for various acts of terrorism such as armed attack on a detention facility, ambushing of Nigerian soldiers, and strings of kidnapping of foreign expatriates. This article focuses on the emergence and violent activities of *JAMBS*, with a view to signposting possible future trajectories in its evolution. Given this group's increasing prowess in gun attacks and kidnappings, the Nigerian government and indeed the international community must develop a better understanding of its capabilities and reach.

Understanding *JAMBS*

It is pertinent at this juncture to look at the evolution of *JAMBS* and its philosophy. By so doing, we can better appreciate what constitutes its targets and how this might change in the future.

Emergence and Leadership

JAMBS, which roughly translates as "Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa", is believed to have been founded in January 2012, in the immediate aftermath of the 20 January 2012 Boko Haram attack in the city of Kano that resulted in the death of at least 180 people, mostly Muslims. Its existence however became popular from 2 June 2012, when its self-identified leader, Abu Usmatul al-Ansari, released a video proclaiming the creation of the sect and outlining its doctrines.

Security agents and experts suspect that the name 'Abu Usamatul Ansari' is a pseudonym for Khalid al-Barnawi, an erstwhile leader of Boko Haram who is believed to have trained with Al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Algeria in the mid-2000s. He is suspected to have participated in strings of AQIM-led kidnapping operations in Niger. It will be recalled that Khalid al-Barnawi was among the three leaders of Boko Haram designated as 'global terrorists' by the US State Department on 21 June 2012. The other two leaders were Abubakar Shekau and Abubakar Adam Kamar.¹ Beyond the name of its self-identified leader, very little is known about the sect's organisational structure, funding streams and mode of recruitment, among others.

*Origin of *JAMBS*: Contending Perspectives*

The true origin of *JAMBS* is a subject of speculation, even within security and intelligence circles in Nigeria. Given this circumstance, two contending perspectives on its origin exist: the splinter and rebranded schools of thought.

The first and dominant school of thought posits that *JAMBS* is a splinter group or offshoot of Boko Haram. Security agents and some experts believe that the sect was created by former Boko Haram commanders who were disenchanted with the leadership style of the current spiritual leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau. Recent developments indeed confirm the existence of fissure in Boko Haram.

It will be recalled that a faction of Boko Haram led by Sheikh Abu Mohammad Abdulazeez announced a ceasefire on 28 January 2013 as a precondition for talks with the Borno State government. Sheikh Abdulazeez, who claimed to be the second-in-command to Abubakar Shekau, did acknowledged in his speech the existence of factions

within the Boko Haram: "Of course, there is a faction within us, but the larger faction of our movement is the one in support of this ceasefire move. Moreover, once top members of our group, including Imam Abubakar Shekau, are in support of the need for ceasefire, other smaller factions can be dealt with easily".²

The ceasefire announcement by the Abdulazeez-led faction was cautiously welcomed by the Nigerian government. Around the same time, another faction of Boko Haram led by Mujhadeen Marwan, who claimed also to be the second-in command to Abubakar Shekau, insisted that government must fulfil certain conditions before negotiation could begin. Shortly afterwards, yet another faction distributed leaflets carrying messages purportedly from their leader, Abubakar Shekau, which denied ever delegating anybody to discuss with the Borno State government on ceasefire.

In a rare news conference in Maiduguri on 24 February 2013, four members of Boko Haram led by Abu Mohammad Abdulazeez, again restated to journalists that its ceasefire announced in January was still in force. The Abdulazeez-led splinter group claimed that the spiritual leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, authorised the January 28 ceasefire declaration, insisting that it must be obeyed by all members and vowed to go after those perpetrating a bloody campaign.³ The Abdulazeez-led group also stated that it had realised its goals were not achievable through violence.

The already confused situation became more complicated when surprisingly on 3 March 2013, Abubakar Shekau, the spiritual leader of Boko Haram, disclaimed the ceasefire offer by the Abdulazeez-led splinter group. In an undated video, Abubakar Shekau clarified that his group was not involved in any peace talks with the government, and even threatened to kill Abu Mohammad Abdulazeez for declaring the ceasefire.⁴ No doubt the orgy of violence has continued in northeast Nigeria.

Therefore, while some analysts see *JAMBS* as one that is complementing the 'struggle' by the Boko Haram sect under Abubakar Shekau, others insist that its emergence is a clear indication of the fragmentation of the leadership of Boko Haram along conflicting ideological stands. It reflects, in part, the internal political and identity crisis that has bedevilled the sect. The overt crack within Boko Haram evident in conflicting signals from self-acclaimed top commanders of the sect makes the argument that *JAMBS* is one of its breakaway faction with a new brand name and philosophy most plausible.

The second school of thought dismisses the theory that *JAMBS* is a splinter group from Boko Haram. Instead, it contends that *JAMBS* is only but a rebranded or repackaged Boko Haram. This school of thought posits that the obvious decline in popularity of Boko Haram evident in growing criticisms of its barbaric killing of people both Muslims and Christians provoked a re-thinking by Boko Haram. Hence, the decision to re-brand with the hope of attracting some local support and hindering the cooperation of the people with the security agencies in routing out its members.

Concerned groups such as the Muslims Against Terror (MAT) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) are leading proponents of this perspective. The MAT, for instance, argues that "the re-branding of this terrorist cult [Boko Haram] comes amidst a successful security and public campaign against their nefarious operation, which has led to the capture of many of their tactical commanders and their sponsors".⁵ Similarly, the CAN contends that the change in name from Boko Haram to *JAMBS* is a ploy to elicit attention and pave way for negotiation. It tersely described the emergence of *JAMBS* as 'the same finger of a leprous hand', intent on the Islamisation of Nigeria and intimidation of Christians.⁶

If indeed *JAMBS* is an attempt to rebrand Boko Haram, it is certainly not a novel development. In fact, documents retrieved from the Abbottabad home of Osama Bin Laden after his was killed showed that Osama was deeply concerned by an apparent loss of support in the Muslim world for the Al Qaeda brand that he considered a major rebranding of Al Qaeda to allow it to better exploit the Arab Spring revolts.⁷

From the foregoing, it can be argued that the two perspectives though insightful in their arguments, are however reconcilable. To be sure, both perspectives differ on their account of the circumstance underpinning the emergence of *JAMBS*, but they are strikingly in unison on the point that the birth of *JAMBS* is inextricably tied to the existence of Boko Haram; whether seen as a splinter or refurbished group.

Philosophy and Ideology of *JAMBS*

The philosophy or ideology of *JAMBS* is also different from that of Boko Haram, which many believed it sprouted from. Boko Haram, for instance, considers western influence on Islamic society, particularly western education, as the basis of the religion's weakness. Its ideology is rooted in Salafi jihadism, and driven by *takfirism*. Salafism, for instance, seeks to purge Islam of outside influences and strives for a return to the Islam practiced by the "pious ancestors", that is Muhammad and the early Islamic community. Salafist Jihadism is the specific interpretation of Salafism which extols the use of violence to bring about such radical change.⁸

Adding to the Salafi Jihadi ideological strain is *takfirism*. At the core of *takfirism* is the Arabic word *takfir*—pronouncing an action or an individual un-Islamic.⁹ *Takfirism* classifies all non-practising Muslims as *kafirs* (infidels) and calls upon its adherents to abandon existing Muslim societies, settle in isolated communities and fight all Muslim infidels.¹⁰ Boko Haram adherents are motivated by the conviction that the Nigerian state is a cesspit of social vices, thus "the best thing for a devout Muslim to do was to 'migrate' from the morally bankrupt society to a secluded place and establish an ideal Islamic society devoid of political corruption and moral deprivation".¹¹ Non-members were therefore considered as *kuffar* (disbelievers; those who deny the truth) or *fasiqun* (wrong-doers), making such individual or group legitimate target of attack by the sect.

JAMBS subscribed to a different philosophy or ideology. In the video of June 2012, which was made in Arabic and translated in Hausa and English, Usamatul Ansari released what best captures the sect's philosophy. According to him, *JAMBS* "considers anybody that accepted the *khalimatush shahada* (believing in one God and Prophet Muhammad as the messenger of Allah) as a Muslim who must not be killed except he/she has committed an act that is punishable by death as stated in the holy Qur'an. Islam forbids killing of innocent people including non-Muslims. This is our belief and we stand for it."¹²

He also claimed that *JAMBS* does not believe in killing innocent security operatives except if they are attacked by them or in self-defence. Ansari's speech clearly indicated that their understanding of Jihad in Islam is different from any other group in Nigeria, such as Boko Haram, that claims to be engaged in Jihad for the sake of Allah.¹³

Thus, while the Boko Haram sect considers every non-Muslim including Christians as enemies that must be killed, *JAMBS* claims that it abhors the killing of innocent non-Muslims except in self-defence or if they attack Muslims. While the ultimate objective of Boko Haram is to overthrow the secular Nigerian state and impose its own interpretation of Islamic Sharia law in the country, the core objective of *JAMBS* is a chosen commitment to defend the interest of Islam and Muslims in Africa. Indeed, the goal of *JAMBS* sits perfectly well with the admonition of AQIM leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel (Abu Musab Abdel-Wudoud) to affiliate Islamists groups concerning the Islamic Jihadi Project in Azawad. A confidential letter from Droukdel to his fighters in Mali, found by the *Associated Press* in Timbuktu, following bombardment of the town by French forces, read in part: "At this stage you should avoid issues of takfir (i.e. accusing Muslims of being infidels) and the issue of sects and other issues that the mind of the youth cannot understand. The general logo at this stage should be defending Muslims from those who want to victimize them..."¹⁴

It will not be a surprise if evidence emerge in the future that *JAMBS* was part of the groups served this message. As elaborated further in the succeeding section, this philo-ideological commonality may well corroborate the suspicion that 'Abu Usamatul Ansari' is truly a pseudonym for Khalid al-Barnawi, who is believed to have ties with AQIM. More so, this could probably accounts for why some security personnel and foreigners who

JAMBS sees as 'enemies of Islam and Muslims' in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, constitute its prime targets of attacks, at least for now.

Focused and Audacious Armed Violence

In about one year of its existence, *JAMBS* has mounted, and claimed responsibilities for, spectacular attacks that have unsettled security establishments, both within and outside Nigeria. Its first major attack was on 26 November 2012, when its member stormed the Special Anti-robbery Squad detention centre at Nigeria's capital city, Abuja, freeing its members and others detainees. Shortly afterward, it claimed responsibility for the attack in an email message, stating that "Allah SWT has obligated us to help those that are oppressed, especially those oppressions that is taking place in the security cells, prisons and other detention centres etc. and has become part of the main functions and basics that form *Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina fi Biladissudan*....we are stating loud and clear that many of those captured by the Nigerian security or by the Christian in Plateau state such as the women and children in Langtang, Yalwan Shandam etc to mention but a few. By Allah's grace we are marching towards their freedom."

Part of the contents of the email message was targeted at drawing some impressionable Muslim youth into its fold, when it encouraged them to join its campaign which it described as a 'noble duty' that Allah has commanded them to do. By dressing its statements in messianic and redemptive garb, *JAMBS* wants to exploit the opportunity created by recurrent ethno-religious conflicts in some parts of northern Nigeria, especially the city of Jos, Plateau State, to radicalise and recruit some Muslim youths.

Its second attack was the kidnapping of Francis Colump, a French citizen working for the French company, Vergnet, in Katsina State in December 2012. Indeed, kidnapping for ransom is far more pervasive in southern Nigeria (particularly in the South-East and South-South zones), where some youth gangs have turned such opportunistic acts into a lucrative industry in the face of declining opportunity for legitimate livelihood. Kidnapping however is gradually percolating into northern Nigeria in a more insidious way. In particular, the abduction of foreigners by groups such as *JAMBS* is raising and internationalising the stake in northern Nigeria. As shown in Table 1, *JAMBS* has mounted and equally claimed responsibility for several other spectacular attacks.

Table 1: Attacks Blamed on *JAMBS*

| Date | Location | Target(s) | Description | Remarks |
|--------------|---------------|---|---|--|
| 26 Nov. 2012 | Garki, Abuja | Headquarters of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) | Attack and freeing of some inmates in the detention facility of the SARS headquarters | <i>JAMBS</i> claimed that the attack was in compliance with a Quranic injunction that urged believers to fight for the oppressed and the feeble. It promised similar attacks against detention centres across the country. |
| 19 Dec. 2012 | Katsina State | Francis Colump | Kidnapping of Francis Colump, a French citizen working for the French company, | <i>JAMBS</i> claimed that the reason for kidnapping Colump is the stance of the French |

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|--------------|------------------------|--|--|--|
| | | | Vergnet | government and the French people on Islam, specifically citing France's major role in the (planned) intervention in northern Mali. |
| 19 Jan. 2013 | Okene, Kogi State | Convoy of Mali-bound Nigeria soldiers | Ambushing of a truck conveying Mali-bound Nigeria soldiers, resulting in the death of two soldiers and injuring of five others | <i>JAMBS</i> claimed it attacked the soldiers because of Nigeria's contribution of troops to Mali. |
| 17 Feb. 2013 | Jamaare (Bauchi state) | Seven expatriates working with a Lebanese construction company, Setraco Nig. Ltd | Those abducted were four Lebanese, one Briton, a Greek citizen and an Italian. | <i>JAMBS</i> claimed responsibility for the kidnapping, citing "the transgressions and atrocities done to the religion of Allah by the European countries. |

The recent kidnapping of seven foreigners on February 2013 by *JAMBS* is the biggest of its kind since the outbreak of violence in northern Nigeria. While claiming responsibility for the audacious attack in a signed statement on Twitter, the group justified the act thus:

Based on the transgression and atrocities done to the religion of Allah SWT by the European countries in many places such as Afghanistan and Mali, by Allah's grace, Jama'atu Ansarul Musilimina Fi Biladissudan have the custody of seven persons, which include Lebanese and their European counterparts working with Setraco in Nigeria on the 8th of Rabiul Thani, 1434 equivalent of 7th February, 2013. It is stressed that any attempt or act contrary to our condition by the European nations or by the Nigerian government will lead to the happenings as it was in the previous attempt.¹⁵

Analysts surmised that the phrase "previous attempt" referred to was the killing of Franco Lamolinara (Italian) and Christopher Mcmanus (Briton) in Sokoto State, on March 2012, during a botched attempt by the Nigerian Forces and British Special Boat Squad to rescue them. Both hostages, who were working for an Italian construction firm, B Stabilini, in Birnin Kebbi, Kebbi State, were taken hostage in March 2011. Intelligence and security operatives suspect that *JAMBS* may have been responsible for the abduction and subsequent killing of Lamolinara and Mcmanus during the failed rescue attempt. *JAMBS* was later placed on the UK Proscribed Terror List on 23 November 2012, for the kidnapping and killing of these Europeans while operating under the name "Al Qaeda in the Lands Beyond the Sahel."¹⁶

Given the known history of its suspected leader, Khalid al-Barnawi, coupled with the conduct of kidnapping operations similar to those of AQIM, some security experts believe that *JAMBS* has links to AQIM. Indeed, the AQIM had long nursed the ambition of expanding its jihadist tentacle into Nigeria, possibly through establishing ties with local militant Islamists sects.

For instance, in an interview with *Al Jazeera* on 14 June 2010, AQIM leader, Abu Musab Abdel-Wudoud, stated that his group has been talking to Boko Haram and intends to supply it with weapons to "defend Muslims in Nigeria and stop the advance of a minority of Crusaders". He further noted that al Qaeda has an interest in sub-Saharan Africa for "its strategic depth that would give it a bigger scope for manoeuvres." Analysts with *Strategic Forecasting Incorporated* (Stratfor) quickly dismissed the intent of AQIM to bond with Boko Haram as mere wishful thinking or rhetoric, retorting instead that "issuing statements claiming an alliance is easier than actually creating a meaningful accord and several factors complicate AQIM's intent to move into Nigeria".¹⁷ The present writer however warned that such expression of interest by AQIM "surely opens a window of opportunity that can be exploited by global jihadist to gain foothold in Nigeria".¹⁸ In view of *JAMBS's* transnational outlook and targets (focusing mainly on kidnapping of Westerners) analysts with *Stratfor* have recently concluded that "it appears that the group [AQIM] has established ties with Ansaru [*JAMBS*] and that the tensions between national and transnational factions of Boko Haram led to the split".¹⁹

Although the possible connection between *JAMBS* and other jihadist groups such as AQIM with strong footprints in the Sahara-Sahel region remain a subject of debate, what is less debatable is its capability to plan and execute ruthless attacks. On 9 March 2013, *JAMBS* released a communiqué and video claiming that it has killed the seven foreign hostages abducted from a construction site on 17 February 2013. According to the SITE Intelligence Group, *Al-Qabidun 'Ala al-Jamr* (Grippers of Embers) Media Foundation, an affiliate of the Sinam al-Islam Network, issued the communiqué in Arabic and English and also provided screen captures of a forthcoming video showing the dead hostage. In the communiqué, "the group stated that the attempts by the British and Nigerian governments to rescue the hostages, and their alleged arrest and killing of people, forced it to carry out the execution".²⁰ The barbaric execution killing of the hostages demonstrates the sect's ruthless capacity to execute its threats given that it had earlier warned against attempts to rescue them. Also, it confirms that *JAMBS* was really the group that earlier operated as "Al Qaeda in the Lands Beyond the Sahel" given its warning that attempt to rescue the hostages will "lead to the happenings as it was in the previous attempt."

Conclusion and Prognosis

Although *JAMBS* had only relied on the use of explosives and firearms in its attacks as well as shunned 'deliberately' killing non-Muslims unless those that assisted security agencies, all these may change in the future. Such a radical shift from its original ideology and modus operandi could be brought about by either endogenous or exogenous factors, or both. The endogenous factors could possibly be the change in the leadership of the sect as a result of natural death or decapitation of its top leaders and commanders. The exogenous variable relates to developments external to the internal workings of the sect, such as aggressive crackdown on its members by Nigerian or even foreign security forces. In the event of this, *JAMBS* may begin to consolidate its ties with other Sahel jihadists in a bid to acquire expertise, weapons, training and funding. If it succeeds in this, the possibility of *JAMBS* redefining and reordering its target selection as well as employing other dramatic terror tactics such as targeted assassination, drive-by shooting and suicide bombing will increase.

The group's name and vision clearly suggest a sect with the intention to project force and influence beyond the shores of Nigeria. In its name lies the intention to mount transnational attacks. Western interests (nationals, facilities and business investments) in countries such as Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger are chiefly at risk of *JAMBS* transnational foray. The 19 February 2013 kidnapping of seven members of the French Moulin-Fournier family in Dabanga, northern Cameroon, by Boko Haram could further embolden *JAMBS* to venture into the territories of West and Central African states to attack Western interests. Therefore, efforts must be made at the national, regional and global levels to use all means available to identify, target and prevent the spread of these jihadist movements and ideology.

A two-pronged approach will make a good start in dealing with the militants Islamist threat. The first intervention entails the deployment of national and international intelligence resources to infiltrate, decapitate and dismantle this sect, before it mutates into a more ominous and deadly jihadist movement. The other entails broad and robust socio-economic and political interventions designed to tackle conditions that foster grievances, extremist tendencies and radicalisation.

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