

WINDS OF WAR IN NIGERIA AND THE ‘TROPICAL SHI'ISM ZONE’

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12 January 2016

ABSTRACT

The end of 2015 was a symbolic period for the Nigerian nation. Several months prior, the newly elected President Muhammadu Buhari ordered the Nigerian military to carry out a mission to eradicate Boko Haram by a deadline of late December 2015.¹

Paradoxically, the sounds of war drums accentuated reaching a peak towards the end of 2015, making peace seem a distant vision. Moreover, in the immediate future, one can expect that Nigeria as a country is plummeting into a state of chaos, due to social, ethnical and religious tensions that exist within its society. At present, the Winds of War originate from three main sources: 1) the endless insurgency of Boko Haram; 2) the resurfacing of the Biafra Republic conflict; and 3) the Shia minority eventual and expected up-rise.

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

Forward

This article will not be examine the Winds of war stemming from the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), specifically the first Nigerian-Biafra war. To clarify, the pro-Biafra's call for the independence of territories which constituted the Biafra Republic, was established in 1967 and re-annexed to Nigeria in 1970, following a civil war that claimed between one and three million lives.¹ The protesters increased their actions a few days after Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) group was apprehended in Lagos in October 2015. As in the past, police and security forces used brutal force to disperse the protesters during these demonstrations.

Additionally, the actual military situation on the battlefield in North-east Nigeria, in the context of the war against the Boko Haram insurgency, will not be examined in this article. It is believed that the Nigerian military and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF),² supported by foreign consultants and sophisticated means (such as drones operated by U.S. soldiers), have succeeded in weakening Boko Haram's operational capabilities, so that the group can no longer

¹ Biafra, officially the Republic of Biafra, was a secessionist state in the southeastern Nigeria that existed from 30 May 1967 to 15 January 1970, taking its name from the Bight of Biafra. The inhabitants were mostly the Igbo people who led the secession due to economic, ethnic, cultural and religious tensions that exist among the various communities in Nigeria. The creation of the new state that was pushing for recognition was among the causes of the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Nigerian-Biafra War. On November 5, 2015, 100 men and women were arrested as they marched peacefully through the city's streets after raising the Biafra flag. They were all imprisoned and accused of treason. However, they were later released when the charges were dropped. It appears the government is determined to ensure any agitation for secession is not allowed to gather momentum. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-20801091>

² Lori-Anne Th eroux-B enoni, "The fight against Boko Haram tangled up in Nigerian and regional politics," Institute for Security Studies-Dakar, 10 February 2015. <https://www.issafrica.org/iss-today/the-fight-against-boko-haram-tangled-up-in-nigerian-and-regional-politics#FR>

retain any territory.³ Despite these counter-terrorist measures, Boko Haram is still an active group that executes almost on a daily basis, suicide bombing attacks in populated civilian areas throughout the country, targeting bus and taxi stations, markets and other places, throughout the country and are not solely contained to North-east of Nigeria. The attacks are primarily perpetrated by teenage girls.⁴

In this article, I will attempt to examine the Winds of war coming from the Shia minority in Nigeria, in order to, assess the degree of danger these groups pose to Nigeria, with the understanding that the Shiite minority and the religious movement are openly supported by Iran, which is looking to expand its revolutionary ideology. Iran, in my opinion, is seeking to create a ‘Tropical Shia Zone’ as part of the ‘Shia Crescent’ within its aspiration for regional hegemony and to become, a global super-power that is recognized in any geo-politics negotiations.⁵ The Iranian nuclear program; the subversion in foreign countries; and the support given to terrorist organizations, should be regarded as tools utilized by Iran, to further its intermediate objectives of becoming a global super-power.⁶

³ The Nigerian Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, said on December 23, 2015, that the Nigerian military had met the December deadline to defeat the Boko Haram terrorists. The minister, trying to convince his lecturers added: “I can confidently say this because just recently, I led a group of 33 journalists from both the local and international media to the hotbed of the insurgency, that is, Maiduguri, Kondugua, Kaoure and Bama.” Citing these cities as freed by the army demonstrate the dimensions of Boko Haram defeat since they were part of his territory control and served as strong holders for the group.

<http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/12/weve-met-december-deadline-to-defeat-boko-haram-fg/>

⁴ Mausi Segun, “Boko Haram Enlists Young Girls as Suicide Bombers”, Human Rights Watch (October 19, 2015), <http://www.npr.org/2015/10/19/449862206/boko-haram-enlists-young-girls-as-suicide-bombers>

⁵The Shia Crescent is the notionally crescent-shaped region of the Middle East where the majority population is Shia or where there is a strong Shia minority in the population.

⁶ The Shia Crescent term was coined in 2004 by King Abdullah II of Jordan at a time when Iran was reportedly interfering in Iraq in the run-up to the January 2005 parliamentary elections. It was said in the context of a threatened, later realized, boycott of the elections by Sunnis in Iraq potentially leading to a Shia-dominated government and the assumption that a Shia Iraq might fall under the influence the Islamic (Shia) Republic of Iran. Iran in its efforts to spread its revolutionary ideology and as one classifies as ‘State Sponsors of Terrorism’ found itself in embarrassing situation with arm smuggling in Nigeria. A weapons ship ‘Marshall Islands’ departed from the Iranian port of Bandar-Abbas and arrived in the Apapa port of Lagos, Nigeria, in July 2010. On October 26, 2010,

Shia awakening in Nigeria

Colonel Sani Usman, the Nigerian military spokesperson, recently announced that Shiite members barricaded a road at the time when Lieutenant Colonel Tukur Buratai, Nigeria's Chief of Army Staff, was passing by to pay homage to the Emir of Zazzau and on his way to attend a review parade by 73 Regular Recruit Intake at the Nigerian military Depot in Zaria. According to the spokesman, the sect numbering hundreds and armed with dangerous weapons, barricaded the roads with bonfires, heavy stones and tires. After a short exchange of fire, the General's caravan passed.⁷ The Nigerian army's response was fierce and unequivocal, resulting in the deaths of more than 1000 civilians in Zaria city.⁸ The army targeted the Hussainiya Baqiyyatullah mosque and religious center, and the home of the Shiite leader. Authorities arrested the leader of the Shiite Muslim sect, Ibrahim El-Zakzaky. During the incident, El-Zakzaky's deputy and chief spokesman were killed as well as his wife Zeenat and son Aliy.⁹ The Iranian government has

the shipping containers were opened and the weapons were discovered. The weapons, including rocket launchers and grenades, were found in containers labeled as building materials. Nigerian authorities have said that the shipment originated in Iran and was destined for the capital, Abuja, after its arrival in Lagos. Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki was then sent to Nigeria, where he told authorities there had been a mistake and that the weapons' destination was actually Gambia. Senegal has accused Gambia of providing arms for anti-government forces, especially for the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance in South Senegal. For more information refer to: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-weapons-idUSTRE69T1YT20101030> and in <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/11/15/126218.html> ; http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/12/world/africa/12nigeria.html?_r=0 ; to read a full analysis of the crisis refer to: "The Ongoing Mystery of the Iranian Arms Shipment in Nigeria," *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, November 22, 2010.

⁷Nigeria's Chief of Army Staff, Lieutenant Colonel Tukur Buratai said that it was by divine intervention that he escaped an assassination attempt by members of the Shiites Muslim sect.

⁸According to Human Rights Watch the killing of hundreds of Shia Muslim members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), by Nigerian army soldiers from December 12 to 14, 2015, appears to have been wholly unjustified. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/22/nigeria-army-attack-shia-unjustified>

⁹Zakzaky's son, wife among hundreds of our members killed by Nigerian Army, Shiite group says, *Premium Times*, December 13, 2015. <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/195137-zakzakys-son-wife-among-hundreds-of-our-members-killed-by-nigerian-army-shiite-group-says.html> ; <http://www.smh.com.au/world/nigerian-shiite-sect-leader-ibrahim-zakzaky-arrested-and-aides-killed-20151213-glml7v.html>

called on the Nigerian authorities to respect religious figures, sites and expressed sadness over violent clashes between the Nigerian Army and members of the Muslim sect, Shiite, in Zaria.¹⁰

Zaria's events raised questions and highlighted facts concerning Islamic radicalization in Nigeria, the Federal attitude towards Shiite minority and the Iranian involvement in Nigeria in its efforts in expanding its influence in Nigeria especially among the Shiite community. The chronology of events and their development should raise concern to those who are investigating the rise of Boko Haram insurgency and those who are trying to put an end to it. Boko Haram militants use terrorism only when the military intervenes by using brutal force, in what is referred to as the *Battle for Maiduguri* in July 2009. In this crucial incident, the military captured alive, Boko Haram's spiritual and charismatic leader, Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf and transferred him to the police, where he was questioned and murdered.¹¹ Based on the reasons behind Boko Haram's

¹⁰ The warning was given by a spokesperson for Iran's Foreign Ministry, Hossein Jaber-Ansari on Sunday, December 13, 2015, according to state-owned network, Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA). See Jola Sotubo report, *Iran warns Nigeria following Zaria attacks*, <http://pulse.ng/local/army-vs-shiites-iran-warns-nigeria-following-zaria-attacks-id4460771.html>

¹¹ It was in June 2009, in the serene atmosphere of Maiduguri, the Borno State capital. Mohammed Yusuf, leader of the now outlawed Boko Haram, had led a mourning procession of his members, to bury four of its members who had died in a motor accident, on the Biu-Maiduguri road. In the process, they encountered men of the *Operation Flush*, the then state's security outfit, put in place by the then governor, Senator Ali Modu Sheriff, to fight armed robbery, and the men questioned the group on why those of them riding on okada (motor-scooter), were not wearing crash helmets. The group told the security operatives that it had no business with their government, and as such, the laws of the government could not be binding on them. An argument ensued in the process, and in the end 17 members of the group were sent to their early graves, by the security operatives. Expectedly, the security agents involved in that unfortunate incident claimed they acted in self-defense, and among other things claimed that the Boko Haram members attempted to 'snatch' their guns.

In spite of the heavy casualty on the part of the group, it did not fight back immediately, instead, it wrote to the Police and the state government asking for adequate compensation in accordance with Islamic injunctions, for the families of the deceased. But both the state government and the security operatives ignored the request.

However, in one of his Friday sermons, Yusuf had publicly announced the intention of the group to take revenge, should the government fail to act. Because Yusuf, at the time represented what looked like an alternative to Sheriff's government, owing to its repressive postures, it was easy for Yusuf to galvanize support base, since no politician had the courage to stand up to the then governor at the time. Yusuf, therefore, became a rallying point. After taking every practical step to seek compensation without any positive response, Yusuf concluded the only option left to the group was to seek revenge. This revenge was the catalyst to the July 26-29, 2009 uprising in Maiduguri, and to date, Nigeria and Nigerians are worse for it. On Boko Haram's shift towards terrorism refer to my article "*who are you, Boko Haram?*" International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, Herzliya, December 12, 2012.

shift to terrorism, as explained above and, following the Zaria killing and the arrest of El-Zakzaky,¹² the head of Nigeria's Islamic Movement (IMN)¹³, the imminent question that faces us today is whether or not Nigeria is threatened by a group more radical than Boko Haram?

The Shiite-Sunni tension in Nigeria

Who are the Shiites in Nigeria?

Before trying to answer this complex question, that may actually have no solutions at present, it is necessary to analyze and examine the tensions that exist between Sunnis and Shiites in Nigeria. It is believed that half of the Nigerian population (estimated at 178,516,904 as of July 1, 2014)¹⁴ is Muslim. The Shiite is a minority sect among Nigeria's approximately 86 million Muslims - around 10 million. Shia communities are based in Northern Nigeria, especially in Kano, Sokoto, and Kaduna.

Shia Muslims are present in all strata of the Muslim Ummah in Nigeria, including the civil service and active in economic trade. Their members are close aides to several politicians. The main Shia activities include demonstrations organized on specific occasions like Quds (annual event held on the last Friday of Ramadan) and Ashura (the tenth day of Muharram [the first

<http://www.ict.org.il/Article/991/Who%20Are%20You,%20Boko%20Haram?> ; Also refer to Ahmad Murtada, "Boko Haram in Nigeria: its beginning, principles and activities in Nigeria," University of Kano (13.11.2012), pp. 8-10. http://download.salafimanhaj.com/pdf/SalafiManhaj_BokoHaram.pdf

¹² Zakzaky reportedly sought inspiration from the Iranian revolutionist and leader, the late Ayatollah Khomeini. "Nigeria must become wholly Islamic and Allah proclaimed Lord of the entire nation," Zakzaky said in 1996 when Nigerians faced repression under military rule.

¹³According to Adel Assadinia, a former career diplomat (who defected and is now living in Europe), who previously served as Iran's consul-general in Dubai and was an adviser to the Iranian foreign ministry, the IMN was set up by and modeled on the Lebanese Hezbollah and that Iran provides the IMN with training "in guerrilla warfare: bomb-making, use of arms such as handguns, rifles and RPGs, and the manufacturing of bombs and hand grenades." See in the link: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/12/23/nigeria-s-khomeini-spreading-iran-s-revolution-to-africa.html> ; Refer also to Daniel Brett senior analyst who interviewed Adel Assadinia: Will Iran's proxy go to war in Nigeria? *Pulse* (30.11.2015).

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/irans-proxy-go-war-nigeria-daniel-brett-msc-fras>

¹⁴ Source: Worldometers, <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/nigeria-population/>

month of the Islamic calendar] in the Islamic calendar and marks the climax of the Remembrance of Muharram) Days. During these demonstrations, their members blocked the main roads in the northern cities and intimidated the public, including the police, whose permission they do not seek.¹⁵ In Nigeria, Shi'ism represents an anti-establishment movement that militates against normative northern religious practices viewed as un-Islamic.

Shia Islam was almost unknown in Nigeria until the early 1980s when a Muslim radical, Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, fired by the Iranian revolution, campaigned for an Islamic government and stricter adherence to Sharia law (Islamic law). For many youths in the poor, predominantly Muslim North, joining Zakzaky's movement was an act of rebellion against a disappointing political and religious establishment.

Muslims are split into two main branches, the Sunnis and Shia.¹⁶ Members of the two sects have co-existed for centuries worldwide, and share many fundamental beliefs and practices. The differences between the two branches lie in the fields of doctrine, ritual, law, theology and religious organization. Frequently it seems that their leaders are in competition with one another. The Shi'ism, with its history of activism and martyrdom, has provided an attractive alternative to the stagnant, corruption-tainted traditional religion. In Nigeria, the Shia minority, however, have been met with opposition from Sunnis who feel threatened by the Shia fervor. The authorities and Sunni believers regard the Shiite Movement as a provocation and consider their rituals insulting. The relationship between IMN lead by sheik Ibrahim El-Zakzaky and the government has always been characterized by mutual antagonism and recurrent hostility. The IMN accuses

¹⁵ For further information see: Islamic Actors and Interfaith Relations in Northern Nigeria, Policy Paper No.1, The IRP-Abuja Project (March 2013). <http://www3.qeh.ox.ac.uk/pdf/nrn/nrn-pp01.pdf>

¹⁶ The split originates in a dispute soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad over who should lead the Muslim community.

the government of wanting to eradicate it. The government views IMN as an extremist group building up the critical mass it needs to eventually turn violent.

Sheik El-Zakzaky has never publicly advocated violence, but the IMN has a history of clashes with security forces and other Muslim groups. In 1991, El-Zakzaky and his followers clashed with security forces in Katsina. In 1996, his followers seized and decapitated a Christian on the allegation that his wife used pages torn from the Quran to clean their infant. In June 2005, they clashed with emirate authorities in Sokoto, over access to the city's central mosque. In July 2007, the murder of a Sunni cleric in Sokoto, Umar Dan Maishiyya, who had been highly critical of Shias, sparked reprisal attacks that killed at least five Shiites and destroyed many of their homes. In September 2009, El-Zakzaky's supporters clashed with police in Zaria, leading to injuries and deaths on both sides. In another major clash, during a pro-Palestinian procession in Zaria on 25 July 2014, soldiers killed about 35 members, including three sons of El-Zakzaky, all undergraduates at the time. That brutal killing was widely condemned and the Nigerian government set up a committee to investigate.

Violent religious clashes amongst tribes, communities and ethnics are common in Nigeria. On November 3, 2014, a suicide bomber exploded at the Faydia Islamic school, located near the old market in Potiskum. The school is run by the Shiite group. The bomber struck when members of the Shiite group were gathering to go on a procession to mark the Ashura day.¹⁷ As the pilgrims were about to embark with the procession, the bomber detonated in their midst.¹⁸ Additionally,

¹⁷ Ashura day is the tenth day of the month of Muharram, the new month of the Islamic calendar. Shiite Muslims commemorate the day to mourn the death of Hasain Bn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Mohammed who was reportedly killed on that day.

¹⁸ No group claimed responsibility for the attack, but suspicion is bound to fall on militant Sunni Islamist group Boko Haram. "Nigeria Shias in Potiskum hit by 'suicide attack,'" *BBC*, November 3, 2014 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-29882218>

on November 27, 2015, a Shiite procession near the city of Kano in northern Nigeria was targeted by a suicide bomber. Clad in black, like members of the procession, the bomber ran into the crowd and detonated his explosives killing 22 people. Authorities arrested a second suspected bomber. Boko Haram, the Sunni jihadists, who want to create a hardline Islamic state in northern Nigeria, claimed responsibility through Twitter, for the explosion.¹⁹ However, leaders of the Shiite minority rejected those claims and accused the Federal Government of being responsible for the attack.²⁰ As explained earlier, the animosity towards Shiites and the consequences on the Shiite minority in Nigeria has awoken Iran.

Iran's involvement in Nigeria

In a paper published in 2012 by Dr. Ely Karmon, a Senior Research Scholar at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), the information concerning the Iranian and Hezbollah presence and activities in Africa, is summarized. Dr. Karmon warned of the threats of this presence and its influence, concluding that the Iranian and Hezbollah presence and activities in Africa expand far beyond the legitimate political, economic, social and cultural levels and

¹⁹ On November 27, 2015 the group said: “When our brother reached his target, he detonated his explosive belt amidst their gathering.” <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/kano-blast-suicide-bomb-leaves-many-dead-as-shia-muslim-procession-attacked-in-nigeria-a6751866.html>

²⁰ Sheikh Ibraheem Zakzaky identifies perpetrators of Kano bombing attack, “We know the names of the contractors and those contracted to commit the massacre, their identity is not hidden from us. Therefore we cannot be cowed by an imaginary Boko Haram tale, let them tell it to the fools and ignorant. They should know that they are dealing with those with foresight, wisdom and intelligence, and above all with the real religion”.

Sheikh Zakzaky further explained that the perpetrators of Kano bomb attack were the same people that seven years ago in broad daylight, killed two people, and carried out an attack on the Ashura procession, in addition to killing people in Potiskum and 34 people during Quds Day procession in Zaria in 2014. “In most cases, these killers carry out the offensive under the watchful eyes of security operatives, sometimes escorted by tinted glass vehicles”. See at the Islamic Movement site .Islamic Movement in Nigeria: Shaikh Zakzaky identifies perpetrators of Kano bomb attack, December 1, 2015 http://www.islamicmovement.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2196:shaikh-zakzaky-identifies-perpetrators-of-kano-bomb-attack&catid=41:frontpage

disperse into the dangerous area of terrorism and subversion. This threatens not only the outside players and interests, but also the stability of the host countries.²¹

Like Karmon, Jacob Zenn, an analyst of African and Eurasian Affairs for The Jamestown Foundation, wrote in 2013 that in recent years, Iran's Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah have coordinated intelligence gathering on U.S. and Israeli targets in Nigeria. They have also engaged in weapons and drug trafficking in West Africa with operatives drawn from Nigeria's Shi'a community.²² According to Zenn, through this involvement, Iran is eager to achieve several goals: 1) to win the support of African countries and its one billion people to oppose Israel, the UN and U.S. policies targeting Iran; 2) in case of a military attack (by U.S.A and Israel) on its nuclear facilities and other contingencies, Iran seeks to transform the crisis to a worldwide one. This concept explains El-Zakzaky's interview on the BBC in 2012, where he said that if Iran were attacked, the impact would be felt "not only in Nigeria, but in the entire world."²³

As reinforcement to Karmons' and Zenns' analysis, Alex McAnenny who wrote in 2014 *A Tutorial Overview of Iran's Strategic Influence in Africa* argues that in West Africa, in general, and in Nigeria, in particular, where there is a huge number of Shiites, Iran is expanding its ideology through Hezbollah, that is well implemented in the country.²⁴ He claims that the large Lebanese communities in West Africa operate in fairly unregulated economies – allowing

²¹ Ely Karmon, The Iran/Hezbollah Strategic and Terrorist Threat to Africa, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), March 28, 2012. See: <https://www.ict.org.il/Article.aspx?ID=1088>

²² Jacob Zenn, "The Islamic Movement and Iranian Intelligence Activities in Nigeria", Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (October 24, 2013). See: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-islamic-movement-and-iranian-intelligence-activities-in-nigeria>

²³ Guy Taylor, "Attack on Syria Likely to Trigger Terrorists Acts Against U.S., Israel", *Washington Times*, August 26, 2013; "Pro-Hezbollah Sheikh Warns U.S. Interests at Risk if Syria Hit," *Daily Star*, August 27, 2013. Sheikh El-Zakzaky did not explain what would happen, but added: "How much the impact would be, would depend on which areas were attacked."

²⁴ Alex McAnenny, Iran in Africa, Center for Security Policy 2014, p.4, 12.

<https://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Iran-in-Africa.pdf>

Hezbollah to raise funds through money laundering, conflict diamond trading, drug trafficking, and arms dealings. The seizure of ammunition and explosives from a Hezbollah cell on May 30, 2013 in the northern Nigerian city of Kano demonstrates that the group is not only collecting money in West Africa, but is also planning and conducting military activities.²⁵ McAnenny concluded that as a proxy for Iran, the hard military power of Hezbollah acts as mighty power of Iran in the region throughout Shiite communities in Northern Nigeria.²⁶

Following Zaria's killing it is extremely interesting to examine which countries immediately reacted to the event. Unsurprisingly, the first country to react was Iran. The warning message was given by a spokesperson for Iran's Foreign Ministry, Hossein Jaber-Ansari on Sunday, December 13, 2015, according to the state-owned network, Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA). The spokesman said, "Nigeria [...] is now dealing with problems arising from extremism and Takfiri terrorism and we hope that in these conditions preservation of calm and national unity in battling terrorism is prioritized while rash and unconstructive measures are avoided."²⁷ The Vice-Chairman of the Assembly of Experts, Ayatollah Hashemi Shahroudi, strongly criticized Saudi Arabia for siding with the Nigerian army in the massacre of Shiite Muslims of the African country. The Ayatollah said. "the Saudi Arabia's coalition with the U.S. and arrogant powers is a blatant example of friendship of blasphemers; the Saudi king's congratulations to the perpetrators of Nigeria's crimes is shameful and disgraceful [...] in a

²⁵ Hezbollah in Kano, Evidence of West Africa Ambitions - Recorded Future, <https://www.recordedfuture.com/hezbollah-in-nigeria/> ; Johnthomas Didymus, Suspected 'Hezbollah cell', armory uncovered in Kano city, June 2, 2013.

Read more: <http://www.digitaljournal.com/article/351342#ixzz3vcAHFCp8>

²⁶ Weinthal, Benjamin. Analysis: The Rise of Hezbollah in Africa, *The Jerusalem Post*.

11 July 2013.

²⁷ Colin Freeman, "Iran complains to Nigeria over 'massacre' of sect loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini," *The Telegraph*, December 16, 2015. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/colin-freeman/12054599/Iran-complains-to-Nigeria-over-massacre-of-sect-loyal-to-Ayatollah-Khomeini.html> ; <http://urhobotoday.com/?p=20701>

country where Boko Haram kills innocent people and takes children and women as slaves and no effective measure is taken against it, they treat 15 million Muslims in a violent manner only for fulfilling their religious duties and staging protests against Israel.”²⁸ Iranian authorities took severe measures and summoned Nigeria's chargé d'affaires to express its outrage at the Nigerian military’s deadly crackdown on Shiite Muslims, including the arrest of Sheik El-Zakzaky the leader, in the north of the country.²⁹ The chargé d'affaires informed the Nigerian Foreign Ministry that Iran demands that the Nigerian government “immediately sheds light on the incident, treats the injured, and compensate for damages.” Additionally, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif called for the “immediate and serious action to prevent violence” against Shiites in a telephone call to his Nigerian counterpart Geoffrey Onyeama.³⁰

Since the detention of Sheikh El-Zakzaky, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani has called on President Muhammadu Buhari to set up an investigation into the recent violence in Zaria. Unlike Nigeria, Iran is a Shiite-majority country, and is known for defending Shiite causes all around the world.³¹

²⁸ Ayatollah Shahroudi raps Riyadh for irrational stance on Nigeria-*IRNA*, 20.12.2015.

<http://ag.irna.ir/en/News/81885704/>

²⁹ Sheikh Ibraheem Zakzaky became a proponent of Shia Islam around the time of the Iranian revolution in 1979. Events in Iran encouraged him to believe that an Islamic revival was also possible in Nigeria. Zakzaky has longstanding ties to Iran. Zakzaky follows Khomeini’s ideology of Vilayat-e Faqih, or “rule of the jurisprudent”, meaning that he is a “supporter of the social and political and religious decisions that come down from Ayatollah Ali Khamenei the supreme leader.”

³⁰ Andrew Sweene, “Iran Summons Nigerian Envoy Over Zaria Bloodbath”, *Naij.com*

<https://www.naij.com/667287-iran-outraged-nigeria-zaria-bloodbath.html>

³¹ President Hassan Rouhani held a telephone conversation with his Nigerian counterpart on December 15, 2015 over the violence involving the Shiia Islamic Movement in Nigeria. Rouhani said that under such conditions that terrorism is a serious threat against many Muslim countries’ security the Muslims need to unite and not permit trivial differences of opinion to lead to acute disputes, since safeguarding the Muslims’ lives is our major and public responsibility.

Read more at: <https://www.thecable.ng/iranian-president-phones-buhari-over-shiia-violence>

The Modalities of Iranian ‘Soft Power’

Iran’s foreign policy priorities are dictated from Ayatollah Khomeini’s famous maxim ‘neither East nor West but Islamic Republic’ (Na sharq, na gharb, jomhuri-e islami).³² The spreading abroad of the Islamic Revolution is fashioned by many tools and on many levels; Iran uses economic leverage and financial cooperation in forging a network of states friendly to its own interests that target it to become a worldwide super-power.³³

The Islamic Republic of Iran uses ‘soft power’ to spread its ideology. The term ‘soft power’ refers to the ability of a state to shape the preferences of another state’s aggressive ways.³⁴ Tools for achieving ‘soft power’ includes the creation of a role model, shared values, goals, diplomacy and propaganda. Sometimes ‘hard power’ (especially in the case of powerful countries in particular) is transformed to ‘soft power’ which became attractive, i.e. Iran is developing nuclear capabilities, which should provide it with military deterrence, as well as technological progress that will enable Iran to use ‘soft power’, vis-à-vis, any counterpart, in order to achieve its goal. Iranian ‘soft power’ is multi-faceted and enacted through a range of different channels such as

³² For further data on Imam Khomeini slogan check his site: http://en.imamkhomeini.ir/en/key/neither_East_nor_West

³³ Iran has invested heavily in strengthening its diplomatic, economic and security ties with Western African countries, especially with Senegal, Mauritania, Gambia, and Nigeria. In parallel of its efforts in West Africa, Iran is not neglecting East Africa especially the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Sudan) that suffer from protracted political strife, arising from local and national grievance, identity politics and regional inter-state rivalries. It is important to pay attention and recommended to a probable result of Iran's influence in West Africa: On 12 December 2015, the Gambia has been declared an Islamic republic by President Yahya Jammeh who said he wanted to further distance the West African state from its colonial past: “In line with the country’s religious identity and values I proclaim Gambia as an Islamic state. As Muslims are the majority in the country, Gambia cannot afford to continue the colonial legacy.” Relations between the Gambia and Iran are strong. The Gambia has supported Iran's right to develop its nuclear program. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/12/gambia-now-an-islamic-republic-says-president-yahya-jammeh>

³⁴ ‘Soft Power’ is a means of indirect use of force enabling the country to achieve its goals by enlisting countries under its leadership, the values it represents, and the example it provides. To enlarge the issue refer to Joseph Nye, *Soft Power*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), pp. 5-15, 30.

cultural diplomacy and an expansion of Iranian cultural centers abroad.³⁵ For a long time, the international community assessed that Iran's 'charming offensive' in African counties aimed at receiving international support for its nuclear program and Iran's interest in Africa is to build a coalition that will stand up for its right to produce nuclear weapons - as well as to create a Muslim block against 'Western imperialism'. Nowadays, when Iran is embraced by western countries (on 14 July 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between Iran and the P5+1 and EU, a comprehensive agreement was signed - a signature that brought Iran back to the family nation) it is obvious that the priority of Iran in the soft diplomacy which was to have boots on the ground for its radical ideology led by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and representatives of Hezbollah. In Nigeria, it was achievable through the Lebanese community and through the large minority of Shiites organized by the Nigeria's Islamic Movement (IMN).

To summarize Iran's involvement in Africa, as part of the 'Topical Shiite Zone', one can conclude that, Iran has achieved at least a few of its asymmetrical objectives in Nigeria: it has an ideological foothold within the country's Shiite community, which might include as much as 5-10% of Nigeria's Muslims. Hezbollah was able to sustain weapons caches and commercial interests in a country that has a notable Lebanese Shiite presence. The Shiites may be a minority in Nigeria, but they are certainly not powerless.

The Lebanese community in Nigeria

³⁵ For further information on The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power see: Edward Wastnidge, "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War," *POLITICS*: Vol. 35(3-4)2015, pp. 364–377. [file:///D:/Users/%D7%93%D7%95%D7%9B%D7%9F%20%D7%93%D7%95%D7%93/Downloads/The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power Fro.pdf](file:///D:/Users/%D7%93%D7%95%D7%9B%D7%9F%20%D7%93%D7%95%D7%93/Downloads/The%20Modalities%20of%20Iranian%20Soft%20Power%20Fro.pdf)

The Lebanese presence in Nigeria dates back to the 1800s.³⁶ This social group today comprises 31,000 individuals who have become a part of Nigeria's ethno scope and has made Nigeria home, in varying degrees.³⁷ The Lebanese have for a very long time played a very important role in the economic development of Nigeria. Their history can be traced back to when they acted as middlemen in most parts of the old Northern Nigeria, by establishing small companies that served as distribution centers of European imported goods and produce. In general, the relations between the Lebanese residents and the Nigerian government are positive. As they are considered to be wealthy families, the Lebanese people are among the largest donors and initiators of supporting the poor in Nigeria and they contribute to the constructions that help these people, such as the Kano Hospital. Simultaneously, these citizens maintain deep and close connections with their homeland Lebanon. The Lebanese community in West Africa, in general, and, in Nigeria, in particular, are often blamed as Hezbollah sponsors. There are disputes over the scale of the support Hezbollah receives from West Africa. However, there is little doubt over how important Lebanese businesses are to the region. With interests ranging from mobile phones, import-export and heavy industry to street stalls and fast-food joints, Lebanese-owned businesses are present at every level of the economy.

Hezbollah as an active actor on the scene

³⁶ Dr. Toyin Falola a distinguished scholar of African history, Atlantic history, and world history, Nigerian born, published many articles on that issue. See: Toyin Falola, "Lebanese Traders in Southwestern Nigeria, 1900-1960," *African Affairs* Vol. 89 (October 1990), pp. 523-553.

³⁷ Stephen Dockry, "Lebanese in Nigeria live under specter of civil war," *The Daily Star*, January 26, 2012, page 3. On the creation of the Lebanese community in Nigeria, as well as its contributions to Nigeria's economy it is suggested to read Peter Adebayo article: "Transnational Networks of the Lebanese-Nigerian Diaspora", *Middle East Institute*, April 19, 2010. <http://www.mei.edu/content/transnational-networks-lebanese-nigerian-diaspora>

Hezbollah leader Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah reacted to the Zaria killing and denounced international bodies' silence and inaction over the tragic event. Nasrallah called on Nigeria's president as well as religious and political leaders to take action in bringing the perpetrators to justice and to release Sheikh El-Zakzaky. He also warned that the massacre of Shias may have been an American-Israeli or Takfiri plot to plunge Nigeria into a dangerous situation.³⁸ In Nigeria, among the Shiite minority, Nasrallah is a major figure. Pictures dating back to 2007, which were taken during a Shiite procession in northern Nigeria, show an amazing symbolic transfer of Hezbollah and the Islamic revolution to sub-Saharan African countries. This kind of gathering existed for fifteen years in Nigeria, since the restoration of democracy in 1992, as they were not allowed under the dictatorial military regimes of the 1980s. What is interesting is to see the transfer of the Shiite symbolism borrowed from gatherings of Hezbollah in Lebanon or the Iranian Islamic revolution. These "Muslims Brothers" (not to confuse with the Egyptian "Muslim Brothers") have the right to wear specific uniforms, and display a specific symbol to mark their religious affiliation: colors, flags, posters. (Source: Hassane Souley).

³⁸ Hezbollah leader condemns world silence on Nigeria massacre - *IRNA*, 22.12.2015.
<http://ag.irma.ir/en/News/81890307/>



In a summit held on July 29, 2015 in Beirut, Islamic scholars from around the globe participated, emphasizing the need for the Muslim world to unite against Israel, saying the Zionist regime has launched an open war on Muslims. Among the participants was the leader of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, Sheikh Ibraheem Zakzaky. Sheikh Zakzaky, during his visit to Lebanon, paid tribute to the martyrs of the Lebanese Hezbollah Resistance Movement. Below are pictures of his visit to the graveyard of Hezbollah martyrs in Lebanon. There is the grave of Imad Mughniyeh and his son Jihad who is buried close to him. (Source: ABNA photo).



The Hezbollah Secretary General Syed Hasan Nasrallah sent a condolence message to Sheikh El-Zakzaky in a letter he wrote on July 26, 2014, following the loss of his wife and son.³⁹ Hezbollah, the Iranian proxy involvement in the Shiite minority and Lebanese community, is going over the conventional. Despite the thousands of kilometers that separate Nigeria from

³⁹ To read the condolence message check the following link: http://islamicmovement.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1216:hizbullah-commiserates-with-sheikh-zakzaky&catid=41:frontpage

Lebanon, the country is faced with a growing threat from a Hezbollah doppelganger. Examples of the threats were supplied by Nigerian authorities on June 2013 when they arrested four Lebanese nationals in northern Nigeria on suspicion of having ties with Hezbollah. A raid on one of their residences yielded a stash of weapons, including anti-tank weapons, rocket propelled grenades, and anti-personnel mines. Nigerian authorities announced that the compound was hosting a terrorist cell tied to the Lebanese Shia movement.⁴⁰ The Nigerian Islamic Movement in creating a state within a state where Sharia laws are implemented, which has been inspired, influenced and supported by Hezbollah's model. The IMN has had a thriving newspaper, al-Mizan, for more than two decades. In addition, it has also begun broadcasting its own internet-based Hausa radio station, Shuhada, on the country's main air waves, similar to Hezbollah's radio station, Al-Nour. IMN also has plans to start a new TV channel, a move reminiscent of Hezbollah's al-Manar. In IMN's strategy, in order to increase its influence and survivability, the movement recruits partisans in all state institutions, as well as, in the police and army.⁴¹

Fears from Boko Haram 2 inside Nigeria

A strong and significant warning came from the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) that warned the Nigerian military authorities against plunging the country into another Boko Haram-like insurgency with the repeated attacks on members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria. The Secretary General of NSCIA, Is-haq Oloyede said that the history of the

⁴⁰ Nigeria's Hezbollah Problem, *CNN*, June 14, 2013. <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/nigerias-hezbollah-problem/>

⁴¹ Ibid.

circumstances that engendered the outbreak of militant insurgency in the past, with serious consequences that Nigeria has yet to recover from, should not be allowed to repeat itself.⁴²

Fears from Boko Haram 2 after the Zaria killing were expressed by the leader of the Northern Elders Council (NEC), Alhaji Tanko Yakassai.⁴³ Yakassai called for caution in the handling of the issue of Shiite Movement. He warned that Nigeria would be in a serious crisis should the group choose to tow the path of violence. “The matter should be handled with utmost care. It is not because I believe what the Shiites did was right, but I believe that now that we are trying to see the end of insurgency, we should not see the emergence of something similar to Boko Haram in a different form [...] The Shiites are more in number in Nigeria and more widespread than members of the Boko Haram. If the group should resort to violence, it will make things more difficult for Nigerians. So I appeal to the government and the military to handle the problem with care.”⁴⁴

What we can learn from the reactions mentioned above, is that there is a real fear in Nigeria that a new version of Boko Haram insurgency will break out and place the country into a situation of chaos. Considering there has been no condemnation from the Nigerian government following the Abuja attack or a detailed report of what happened (None of the spokespersons of President

⁴² Sani Tukur, “Zaria Killings: NSCIA warns Nigerian govt., military against creating another Boko Haram insurgency,” *Premium Times*, December 12, 2015. <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/195148-zaria-killings-nsCIA-warns-nigerian-govt-military-against-creating-another-boko-haram-insurgency.html>

⁴³ Northern Elders Council (NEC) a strong sociopolitical organization, comprising prominent northern politicians, religious clerics, economics persons, retired officers etc. that have tremendous influence on local population, political parties and tendencies. Their main goal is to solve North-east various problems neglected by the Federal Government since independence, and to find peacefully solutions to the religious and ethnical tensions in the country. They influence also on Federal decisions taken in Abuja behind the scenes.

⁴⁴ *PUNCH* - Interview of the newspaper correspondent with Alhaji Tanko Yakassai over the phone. See: “Gbenro Adeoye, Boko Haram: FG claims over Dec deadline confusing,” December 26, 2015. <http://odili.net/news/source/2015/dec/26/820.html>

Muhammadu Buhari or agencies of government issued any statement on the matter) speculations rose on the green light given to the security forces to eliminate any Shii protest.⁴⁵

Conclusion

It will be unwise at this stage, to predict if Nigeria is heading to a new insurgency whether from Biafra or the Shiite Movement. At present, as explained at the outset of this article, Nigeria is fully engaged in efforts to restore order in the North-east and to eradicate Boko Haram, a mission which at present seems never-ending.

Conversely, the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) will not amplify its actions towards Nigerian Authorities without consent and support from Iran. At this stage, Iran is looking to adhere to the nation's family, hence they will insist, at the level of governments, to investigate the Zaria killing. As such, both governments will contain the events. However, it does not mean that Iran via its proxy Hezbollah, will stop their subversion in Nigeria, in order to sustain what they achieved up until now and to expand it as part of the 'Tropical Shia Zone' in Nigeria and in the neighboring Muslim countries that characterize the Sub-Saharan zone.

⁴⁵ Through the Minister of Interior, Gen. Abdularahman Danbazzau (rtd) who visited Zaria to assess the impact of the clash President Muhammadu Buhari has warned religious bodies across the country to refrain from unpatriotic activities that may breach public peace and order. Check the following link: <http://www.nguardiannews.com/2015/12/buhari-warns-religious-groups-nassemblies-probes-zaria-clash/> ; Mohammed Lere Premium Times correspondent reported on 30 December 2015 that for the first time President Muhammadu Buhari comment on Zaria killing saying that he would only comment on the Shi'ite killings after receiving reports of investigations from the police and the Kaduna State Government. Buhari confirmed that he was in touch with the governor of Kaduna state, Nasir El-Rufai, and that the president of Iran had also called to ask about the crisis.

For more information check the link: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201512310338.html>