

What does Boko Haram's pledge to Islamic State really mean?

by [Michael Holtz](#)

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(The Christian Science Monitor) The most immediate payoff from Boko Haram's new pledge of allegiance to the self-described Islamic State is likely a propaganda boost: Boko Haram gets an expanded social media presence with the help of skilled IS propagandists, while IS gains the support of its largest affiliate yet.

But while the two militant Islamist groups have much in common—from terror tactics to the vision of establishing an Islamic caliphate—their stark differences could diminish the chances of a cohesive partnership.

“It seems at the moment that this is a statement that is akin to saying, ‘We are on the same page,’” Ryan Cummings, chief Africa analyst for Britain-based Red24, told *The New York Times*. “But the biggest issue with Boko Haram is that it’s not a homogeneous group and it behaves as different factions. So it’s too early to tell for sure if Boko Haram will fall directly under ISIS command, and to what extent they will act as an ISIS proxy.”

Since its inception six years ago, Boko Haram has focused its campaign almost exclusively on Borno, a state in the country’s isolated northeast. Most of its recruits, which analysts say number about 6,000, are from the local Kanuri tribe.

Meanwhile, IS relies heavily on anti-Western sentiments and a sophisticated propaganda machine to attract recruits from overseas. While its operations have been limited to Syria and Iraq, IS strongly advocates for attacks against the West.

Internationalizing the threat?

Still, analysts say the potential alliance—IS leaders have yet to formally respond to Boko Haram’s—could internationalize a threat that until now has been mostly confined to a single region of Nigeria.

The group's brutality, including enslavement, predates the most gruesome atrocities carried out by IS. What remains unclear is the extent to which Boko Haram might begin to attack Western targets in the country.

J. Peter Pham, director of the Washington-based Atlantic Council's Africa Center, told The Associated Press that the partnership could be used as a recruiting tool. He said fighters from IS franchises in North Africa who find it harder to migrate to the Middle East may choose to join the fight in Nigeria instead. But geographical challenges make IS support in training and manpower a difficult task.

By pledging allegiance to IS, Boko Haram is following in the footsteps of jihadist groups in Libya, Egypt, and Yemen. It also means it has severed ties to Al Qaeda, which it fought alongside two years ago during the Islamist militant uprising in northern Mali.

The pledge comes as a multinational force of 10,000 troops continues to fight Boko Haram. The group has lost control of dozens of towns and villages in recent weeks. On Monday, armed troops from neighboring Niger and Chad crossed the border into northern Nigeria to launch a major new offensive against the group.

With Boko Haram on the defensive, Scott Stewart of Stratfor, a global intelligence and advisory firm, told the news website Quartz that the group's pledge to IS was "a sign of weakness and desperation and an attempt to boost their members' morale, image and attract local support."

"I really don't see it as being a big deal changer—no matter what they call themselves, they're still the same guys," Stewart said.