Alliances between groups have gone on throughout history. Sometimes these groups are different states who cooperate together for economic reasons or for reasons of mutual defense. At other times these groups work together to try and maintain peace or stability within a region. Sometimes however, these groups come together to spread their ideology and their beliefs through whatever means they feel is necessary. These types of mutual alliances are troubling and throughout history have produced some of the worst scenes of murder and loss humanity can remember. In today’s international climate one such pairing can mean significant trouble and provocation for their enemies. This pairing is the one between ISIS or Deash as they are known and the African terrorist group Boko Haram.

While this can’t be considered the first instance of terrorist organizations cooperating, it is distinctively different than the type of cooperation that was seen between the IRA and Hezbollah or the Red Army Faction and the PLO. The connections between the IRA and Hezbollah as well as the cooperation between the RAF and the PLO were focused more on the sharing of logistics and knowledge (Phillips 2014). The IRA and Hezbollah both found common ground in their desire for liberation from what they viewed as oppressive elements and shared training on how best to inflict causalities through bomb attacks. The Red Army Faction of West Germany found aid from the PLO in training regarding both plane hijackings and kidnappings (Zalman n.d.). Neither of these two examples of cooperation shows an attempt to bring the two groups together into one consolidated entity.

In contrast to this the cooperation between ISIS and Boko Haram has clear elements of two organizations coming together in the hopes of connecting their territory and manpower. This
move ties in with one of the biggest overall goals of ISIS which is the hope of forming a new
Islamic State within the Middle East and Northern Africa. Boko Haram did not seek ISIS out in
simply the hopes of finding material and logistical support. They came to ISIS to answer the call
to arms which that organization put out to all other Islamic extremist groups. Boko Haram has
taken to calling themselves Islamic State’s West African Province since the alliance has gone
into effect. (Laccino 2015). This indicates that unlike former cooperation there is more of an aim
of merging the two organizations rather than simply sharing information and materials.

While there are a number of different terrorist groups around the world each with
their own messages and ideology, ISIS/Daesh and Boko Haram of Nigeria are this paper’s focus.
Each of these organizations have spent time in the media spotlight of the west with ISIS being
the current focus, due to the most recent attacks in Brussels as well as the attacks carried out in
Paris last year. However, Boko Haram has been almost equally as active conducting bombings of
farmers markets and a cell phone factory within Nigeria.

Both groups are based around a radicalized version of Islam and each harbor a
deep hatred for the West. While both use many of the same tactics including kidnapping and
suicide attacks they differ in their targets and how they attempt to make their voices heard.
Recently ISIS is the terrorist organization which Western media has been talking about because
of their attacks against targets in Brussels, and Paris. These attacks have propelled ISIS into the
media spotlight because they are clear declarations of intent against the nations of the West.
Meanwhile Boko Haram has killed more people than ISIS so far (Winsor 2015) but they have not
risen to the same level of media attention. One of the reasons for this is their attacks are focused
within Nigeria making them seem much more like a regional issue then an international threat.
However, with these two organizations now working together they present a unique set of problems for the international security community.

**A brief history of ISIS/Daesh**

The origins of ISIS run back to the time of the cold war and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. This invasion was seen by many Muslims as an overt attack and resulted in a number of foreign fighters joining the resistance against the Soviet military. Within this pool of foreign fighters was Ahmad Fadhil Nazzal al-Khalaylah who would later be known to the world as Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi the founder of ISIS. Al-Khalaylah who fought for Al-Qaeda at the same time as Osama Bin Laden but did not meet him until the 90s which meant that Khalaylah’s group formed separate from Osama Bin Laden’s, which ended up being more violent and radical due to the difference in class and the fact that in reality Al-Khalaylah was more of a common thug than an educated leader (Beauchamp 2015).

Al-Khalaylah left Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and found his way to Jordan where he formed his own group known as Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad which would later become ISIS. However before it was to become ISIS the group would be known by another name. During the US invasion of Iraq many extremist groups crossed into the country with the assistance of the Assad regime to fight. Amongst them was Al-Zarqawi’s group. These fighters found a welcoming group in the remnants of the Iraqi army which had been disbanded by the United States after its defeat. These were men trained in warfare who had been left nothing by the US and found these new comers helpful allies.
Another important thing to consider is that Zarqawi’s group was Sunni as were the troops from the disbanded Iraqi army. This meant they found common ground and allowed groups like Zarqawi’s to play on the fears of a Shia run Iraq. During this time the group came under the moniker of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and become the leading group of radical Sunni fighters within the country. As a group they showed a willingness to use very aggressive and violent tactics. This extremism brought them into conflict with their parent organization Al-Qaeda who told Zarqawi and his group that they needed to restrain their attacks and efforts which they ignored. The decision to continue to prosecute a violent and brutal campaign against the Shia population backfired and ended up with much of the organization dead or in prison and Zarqawi himself dead from a US drone strike (Beauchamp 2015).

This all changed in 2010 when Iraq began to fall apart under the leadership of Maliki and his actions which split the country among sectarian lines once again. This meant that the Sunni minority felt threatened once more and gave the new leader of AQI, Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi a pool of individuals to recruit from including former soldiers of Saddam’s army. As the group grew they moved from Iraq and into Syria where they set up a base of power. During this time they raided prisons in Iraq freeing many former soldiers and jihadists who were being held there to farther swell their ranks. The group also found funding from donors in countries like Kuwait and Qatar giving them the financial capital to build up their armory. This all lead up to 2013 which is when ISIS officially took on the name and broke away from Al-Qaeda to form their own group and attempt to form a caliphate.

While some of the goals and drives that ISIS displays are similar to other radical Muslim organizations they show distinct differences as well. The biggest difference is the desire to reform a Caliphate which is an Islamic empire governed and ruled over by sharia law and the
strict teaching of the Islamic faith. The organization has issued a call to arms to draw and bring in not only fighters but also doctors, scientists, lawyers and other skilled individuals to help in the process of state building. The organization is also much more willing to take on an inspirational role putting out calls to arms in the hopes that individuals or small groups will take up the cause and strike out against the west. This makes them dangerous for the fact that they can strike out without making themselves vulnerable within their home territory.

A brief history of Boko Haram

One of the first things to understand when looking into the origins of Boko Haram is that Nigeria the country in which the organization operates is a religiously divided country. The northern part of Nigeria is made up mostly of Muslims while the southern part consists mostly of Christians and this has caused tensions since Nigeria gained its independence in 1960. Before the country gained its independence Sharia law was the law in the north. This meant that judges were also religious officials. However, at the time of independence the support for such a harsh system of law had waned and with the support of Muslim leaders it was done away with in the settlement of 1960 (Ford 2014). This sentiment would last for roughly only ten years before Muslim leaders began to disassociate themselves with the 1960 settlement.

The door was open for the reimplementation of sharia law with the drafting of the 1999 constitution. This document put extended power into the hands of Nigerian states which meant that the more fundamentalist elements in the North were able to reintroduce sharia law once again causing a distinct divide between north and south Nigeria. It was because of this reversion that Boko Haram was able to come into being. The group officially formed in 2002 by a group of Muslim clerics who followed the radical Wahhabi school of thinking. Their desire was to turn
Nigeria into a united Islamic state or at least their version of one. During the first seven years of Boko Haram’s existence the group was radical and belligerent but not yet violent. This would change in 2009.

Boko Haram became violent in 2009 over a law which stated all motorcyclists had to wear a helmet. A claim was made by the group that this went against Islamic values and was used as an excuse to kick off a riot which killed roughly 800 people (Ford 2014). After this the current leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau came to power and turned to more and more violent and ruthless methods to try and achieve the goals of his organization. This includes kidnappings, beheadings of truck drivers, and suicide bombings. The organization has also received training from Al-Qaeda in the fields of demolitions and large scale terrorist attacks which they have performed on numerous occasions (Simcox 2014). This violent and rapid escalation in activity from Boko Haram has been able to go unchecked because of a weak federal government within Nigeria and the fact that the organization is able to hide within the northern part of the country.

Comparing ISIS and Boko Haram

When comparing the two organizations one of the most important similarities to note is that both seek to create a unified Islamic state. One of the overall goals of ISIS is to recreate the caliphate and create an Islamic empire to be able to stand up to what they see as western oppression and interference. For Boko Haram the idea of a unified Islamic Nigeria is not new. It is an idea which existed before the group came into being and was part of the reason for the formation of the group initially. A unified Islamic Nigeria at least under the vision of Boko Haram would mean the expulsion, forced conversation, or death of the Christian south and the
reinstating of Sharia law. This lines up with what ISIS has done so far within Iraq and Syria in that they have oppressed followers of other religions and set about imposing their version of Sharia law upon the regions under the control. However unlike ISIS, Boko Haram has not put out a call for Muslims from around the world to join them in their attempts of Caliphate building.

In their attempts to create a caliphate both organizations have adopted tactics which target similar targets. ISIS and Boko Haram both routinely and brutally target civilian “soft” targets to create terror and fear amongst the people they view opposing them. In the case of Boko Haram their attacks are designed to undermine authority and confidence in the Nigerian government in the hopes of toppling it and creating a power vacuum into which the organization could step in to become the leading regime. For ISIS on the other hand their attacks are designed to disrupt attempts by the western world to combat their moves within their selected territory of Iraq and Syria thus they are more likely to strike outside of their zone of control as was seen in the Paris attacks of November 13th 2015 and the Brussels Attacks of March 22nd 2016.

These tactics often involve attacks that are designed to cause horrific damage to soft targets or raise the levels of tension and fear amongst the target populace. One such tactic employed by both groups is the use of suicide bombers. Attacks by suicide bombers are often times hard to predict and stop because of the lone wolf and sporadic nature of such attacks. In Nigeria Boko Harm has even taken to forcing young girls to strap on bomb vests making them unwilling participants. In Iraq and Syria suicide bombers are often volunteers who feel unable to strike out at the forces they view as occupiers in any other meaningful manner. They are looked upon as Martyrs and their families are often taken care of after their death. Other types of Attacks include drive by assassinations, and beheadings. All of these attacks are violent and gruesome to demoralize opposition.
While most attacks carried out by these organizations are violent some are carried out for another purpose. A major tactic employed by other organizations is the taking of hostages for the purposes of blackmail. It was the type of attack that brought Boko Haram into western media. During April 2014 the group stole away over 200 schoolgirls which they then attempted to blackmail back to the Nigerian government. This event brought massive international attention to the organization that had flown mostly under the notice of the international community. ISIS also has taken hostages one such high profile case was the kidnapping and subsequent burning alive of a Jordanian pilot. Both of these events where high profile instances that brought international attention to the groups however, many kidnappings the groups carry out are used as a means to raise additional money for the buying of arms and equipment as well as means to launch massive social media campaigns to both draw support and manpower into their organization and to attempt and demoralize their enemies.

While comparing the two groups a stark difference begins to emerge though and that is their willingness to employ and recruit foreign fighters. ISIS is very forward about their usage of foreign fighters going so far as to show them off in propaganda videos. This has resulted in the western world coming to know individuals such as Jihadi John and Omar Al-Shishani. The organization also uses advanced social media recruiting techniques to pull in support from all over the world including western states such as France, Germany, and the United States. Meanwhile Boko Haram does not exhibit the same levels of social media competency as their counterparts in ISIS and they seem to be a much more regional focused organization only drawing in supporting fighters from nearby areas such as Chad and Cameroon. This difference is however what brings the two organizations together as Boko Harm has recently pledged their allegiance to ISIS, pledging their support to ISIS in their fight against the west.
Alliance Benefits for ISIS

Organizations such as this do not support one another without knowing they will get something from the deal. The benefits also usually have to be meaningful in some way outside of just vocal support from one organization for the actions of the other. So when Al-Baghdadi accepted the pledge of allegiance from Boko Haram’s leader Abubakar Sheku in March of 2015 he did so because he knew it would bring new resources and options to his group such as trained fighters with experience in combat as well as weapons and explosives. All of which would prove to be helpful in the attempts of ISIS to create and maintain a caliphate.

One of the biggest benefits from such a partnership for ISIS is that it gives legitimacy to the claim of forming a new Caliphate and bringing the many different groups of Islamic extremists together under one banner. By having an active and large organization such as Boko Haram pledge allegiance to ISIS’s cause it shows that as an organization ISIS is able to unite others under their banner and bring together different groups to not only face the response from the west but to provide land and resources to those willing to join their cause (NBC News 2015).

By gaining legitimacy through their partnership with Boko Haram it also provides a boost to recruitment of foreign fighters for ISIS. By providing a new location for volunteer fighters to serve in Boko Haram makes it harder for counter terrorism and intelligence services to track where foreign fighters are heading and try to stop them before they arrive (NBC News 2015). This means that Western governments have to now work twice as hard to try and implement counter terrorism efforts in the prevention of foreign fighters arriving at their destination while ISIS gets to enjoy more support on the ground as well as new areas in which to set up training camps and munitions depots.
Trained and experienced fighters are another resource which Boko Haram brings to the table which ISIS can benefit from. As an organization ISIS has made no attempts to hide the fact they have been bringing in foreign fighters from other countries to train and put on the front lines in their war against the west and their attempts at state building. An alliance with Boko Haram provides them with access to a large group of well trained, experienced, and committed fighters who follow the same ideology and do not require a large expenditure to train and prepare. This gives ISIS and ready to go expansion to their fighting forces that the West will have to deal with in the continuing fight against ISIS.

Lastly Boko Haram brings financial support to the table through the extensive financial network. Up until January of this year financial support might not have been something which ISIS considered itself to need however after a US strike upon one of their banks which resulted in the destruction of somewhere in the tens of millions of dollars range ISIS has found its coffers a bit pinched of late (Jim 2016). This means that as their operations continue to be ongoing the organization will have to start trying to both rebuild their funds and find outside sources of cash to keep their efforts moving. In this regard Boko Harm provides a convenient source of income through their extensive network of finances both within Nigeria and from foreign donors from areas such as Saudi Arabia (Mccoy 2014). By being able to bring money to the table Boko Haram gives ISIS a stop gap measure to prop up their operations until they can once again build up their capital and since these funds are not gathered through the more conventional means it is harder for counter terrorist efforts to freeze or remove these funds.

The benefits for ISIS from such a partnership are mostly not hard gains but rather gains in soft power. By gaining a potential boost to recruitment, a new area to access funds from and the
sense of legitimacy to their claim of being able to bring different groups together under one banner ISIS gets measurable benefits from such a partnership.

**Alliance Benefits for Boko Haram**

Boko Haram stands to gain the most from a partnership with ISIS. In their current state Boko Haram is dangerous however, they are lacking in a direction for their attacks and have been suffering losses at the hands if the Nigerian military who has support from neighboring countries such as Chad, Cameroon, and Niger. By teaming with ISIS, Boko Haram aligns itself with arguably the most powerful terrorist group that is active in the international community at this time. A partnership means that Boko Haram can enjoy the benefits of the advanced social media team that ISIS employs, the wealth of combat experience that ISIS has built up, the stockpile of advanced weapons which ISIS has acquired and the ability to say that they have the backing of the most powerful active terrorist organization in the world.

The first forays of Boko Haram into social media such as YouTube, and twitter were unsophisticated and even the source of ridicule from other extremist terrorist groups. The videos suffered from low production quality and a lack of polish to draw in viewers and get them engaged with the content of the video. However, once the pledge of allegiance was accepted by ISIS the few videos that Boko Haram had placed on YouTube were pulled and their fledging twitter account was shut down (Almukhtar 2015). After a short period of silence a new video emerged that was of much higher quality and included higher production elements such as special effects and the use or archival footage. This video had the hallmarks of videos produced by ISIS showing that the organization had provided at the least training to individuals who had
either been sent to Syria and Iraq or had sent individuals into Nigeria to help with the production and dissemination of the film.

This increased production value of the films showed a refinement in propaganda put out by Boko Haram such as videos featuring Abubakar Shekau, which enabled them to reach a broader audience with their message. It also made them look more professional and legitimate in their eyes of their peers who had before scoffed at their attempts. This ability to produce high quality propaganda videos and to connect with a network of other extremist groups via twitter means that the group now has a better ability to recruit fighters and to counter attempts by the state of Nigeria to operate counter propaganda campaigns against them.

Perhaps more important than this propaganda boost by aligning themselves with ISIS, Boko Haram gained a boost to publicity taking them from the regional stage they have been confined to within Nigeria to the world stage. Cooperating with ISIS ensures that as an organization Boko Haram will be discussed alongside the most discussed terrorist group today. By joining the largest and most active terrorist organization in the current international setting Boko Haram has forced its name onto the international stage which means that countries that until this point had not paid them much attention now need to consider them in counter terrorism concerns (Vinogard 2015). A pledge of allegiance now also comes as almost an attempt to rally their own supporters in the face of losses they have suffered both at the hands of the Nigerian government and the governments of Cameroon and Niger.

Taking these two benefits together it becomes easy to see why Boko Haram would pledge their allegiance to ISIS. This becomes even clearer when looking at the history of both organizations the similarities in their ideologies and the way in which they seek to carry out a
jihad against the west line up. However, it is important to note that there are other reasons for Boko Haram to join with ISIS in a strategic partnership. One major reason is that Boko Haram has currently been facing heavy resistance from Nigerian forces supported by troops from Chad, Niger and Cameroon. This has meant that Boko Haram has lost territory and men due to combat losses. By joining forces with ISIS, Boko Haram gains access potential access to a pool of manpower and more importantly advanced weaponry which could help them to turn the tide back in their favor with their area of operations.

In the realm of terrorism weapons and equipment are vital because an ideology and a goal don’t go too far if the organization does not have the means to implement them. Advanced weapons and equipment is something which ISIS has access to as shown by the news footage of them rolling through towns with looted battle tanks and apcs that were taken from the Iraqi army. This could lead to Boko Haram gaining a military step up against the regional forces arrayed against it which could once again give them the strength to strike out and disrupt trade and governance in the region.

Problems the partnership could face

As it often is with many stories of cooperation there tends to be a stronger and a weaker partner. Often times the stronger partner is able to bring more in terms of resources or manpower to the table but the weaker partner is able to provide a certain thing the stronger partner needs. Rather this is individuals trained in certain skill sets, unique areas of operation or funds to the pairing it is something which appeals to the stronger partner. This is as true in the case of cooperation among ISIS and Boko Haram as it has been in other pairings.
In this partnership it is safe to say that despite the current setbacks that ISIS has had to deal with they are clearly the stronger of the two partners with their ability to strike internationally and their ability to recruit and supply foreign fighters. While Boko Haram is the weaker partner it does bring certain things to the table which ISIS wants and finds useful, such as manpower and land. If the alliance should break down and fall apart Boko Haram would be the group which would stand the most to lose.

ISIS currently has a focus on state building and the desire to create an Islamic Caliphate within its territory, which would slowly expand over time increasing both its geo-political footprint and its ability to present military might towards the rest of the world. By entering into an alliance with a group such as Boko Haram, ISIS is bringing in a partner which does not have the same focus or drive as themselves (NBC News 2015). In this way ISIS will have to spend time and effort to try and bring the ideology of their new partner more in line with their own way of thinking which will draw resources and focus away from their current goals and objectives. This may also cause friction between the two groups as ISIS tries to implement state building methods within territory held by Boko Haram who have so far shown little interest in such things.

This could also harm the image which ISIS attempts to portray in the hopes of attracting more dedicated supporters and fighters to their cause. By bringing into their fold a group such as Boko Haram who at times come off as not being much better than an undisciplined street gang (Mofita 2015) they could drive away possible supporters. If ISIS looks to be catering to a group such a Boko Haram without making them conform to the image of state building and stable governance which ISIS has attempted to cultivate over the time of its existence it could appear
weak or unfocused which would drive away potential support and give other organizations an opening to criticize them such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Financial issues are another concern which ISIS will have to keep in mind when cooperating with an organization such as Boko Haram. With increased pressure from the US and its allies hitting ISIS in its pocket with air strikes like the one which destroyed millions of dollars and the intervention of Russian armed forces in the Syrian conflict the group must now work to maintain its own resources. A group such as Boko Haram focused on a specific geographic region and engaged in a fight with a multi-state coalition may find themselves in need of funds and manpower to continue their campaign. With ISIS having suffered setbacks to their funds they may not be able to provide such assistance to their allies without weakening their own position which would make them look weak and unprepared to support groups which have pledged to their cause.

For Boko Haram the biggest issue to consider when looking join in a partnership with a group such as ISIS is the international attention it will bring down upon their organization. By being an affiliate or province of ISIS the group will begin to draw more international attention which is something they may not be able to afford. Currently much of the success Boko Haram has enjoyed can be credited to the fact they have really only been active within Nigeria. At the current moment the organization has been losing ground to a coalition of African forces including troops from Cameroon and Niger (Nancy 15). As an organization Boko Haram cannot withstand the concentrated military efforts of a regional coalition they will have a hard time dealing with a much larger international coalition dedicated to their removal.
The other thing which a group such as Boko Haram must take into consideration in regards to cooperating with a group such as ISIS is where they would fit into the overall hierarchy of a fully formed Islamic state. This is more so considering that while the groups both share similar ideologies they have different views on what their end goal should be. Since their creation Boko Haram has focused on Nigeria and to an extent, operations in neighboring states such as Cameroon and Niger which have kept them out of the international spotlight for the most part. By pledging allegiance to ISIS and beginning to shift the ideology to conform more with that of the organization they will begin to draw attention from western nations such as the United States and France. This shift in ideology could also lead to the loss of supporters who feel that the group has lost its way (Mofta 2015).

**Conclusion**

An alliance between Boko Haram and ISIS is problematic for the counterterrorism community for the fact that it creates new sets of problems and opens a broader front in the fight against each group. When looking at ISIS and the situation from a counterterrorism viewpoint it is troubling to think of them having more access to funds. This also gives ISIS access to manpower and training to continue their efforts to create a caliphate if the need should arise. Looking at Boko Haram the problem such an alliance presents in countering their organization is that they are able to move from a regional organization to a more global threat receiving training in both combat roles and recruiting. This means a possible increase in the number of militants that Boko Haram would have at their disposal to carry out attacks. It also presents the problem that Boko Haram could begin to shift their focus from regional to international. This would result
in more attacks being launched against Western targets which would further tax the intelligence and counterterrorism communities.

This alliance is something which has a historic precedent which doesn’t make it any less concerning. Cooperation between terrorist groups is not something which is new. The IRA and the PLO worked together to share training and techniques to improve their ability to strike out at those whom they considered their oppressors (Gannon 2009). Another example of terrorist organizations working together is the FARC of Colombia and Hezbollah who use their drug connections to fund the activities which both groups undertake (Farah 2014). While the cooperation between these groups was beneficial it also pressured the groups to change their tactics and in some points to shift their focus from terrorism to a more hybrid form of organized crime.

It is also important to keep in mind the difference in the nature of the partnership between Boko Haram and ISIS when compared to previous partnerships throughout history. The IRA and the PLO or FARC and Hezbollah were not entering into cooperation in order to farther a state building goal. They were sharing information and materials because they felt they had common grievances against foreign invaders. In contrast to this Boko Haram has joined ISIS because they support the ideology of the group and the mission to create a new Islamic empire or caliphate which they would be a part of. This partnership is formed out of the hopes of empire building as well as mutual support.

While ISIS has been losing ground in both Syria and Iraq, their alliance with Boko Haram and other like-minded organizations in Northern Africa have given them a bit of leeway and options if things were to go very badly for them. One of these options is that the territory
held by groups such as Boko Haram are able to be used as an escape valve which ISIS can retreat to in order to regroup and continue their attempts at state building if they should lose within Syria and Iraq. The movement of ISIS fighters to Africa can already be seen in the movements of fighters into Libya (Jim Sciutto 2016). This means that the Islamic State is increasing their presence within Northern Africa which puts them in a close geographic position to Boko Haram which could potentially strengthen the cooperation between the two groups.

Currently cooperation between the two groups seems to be limited to the sharing of ideological, strategic and logistical support, with both groups providing training to one another in tactics. What was a potent threat slowly becomes a multi-headed beast that will be much harder for western counterterrorism forces to combat. This could lead to a prolonged existence to both organizations. Rather that existence will see ISIS and Boko Haram maintain the guises they have taken on so far or shifting into something different in the future like FARC and Hezbollah found themselves doing is yet to be seen. It also means that the intelligence community and counterterrorism units set to the task of dealing with these organizations will have to work twice as hard to control and in the long run eliminate them as a threat to the global community.
Works Cited


Zalman, Amy. *about news: Red Army Faction (also, Baader-Meinhof Group, Germany)*. n.d.