



## Reports

### Split in ISIS-Aligned Boko Haram Group

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Nigerian forces have recaptured swaths of territory lost to Boko Haram. [Issouf Sanogo/EPA]

### **Abstract**

Over the past few years, internal wrangling has been a feature of the Boko Haram group. This report examines the recent leadership split within the ISIS-aligned Nigerian 'terrorist' group, highlighting the reason(s) behind the feud and its implications for the future of Islamic jihadism in the region. It constructs four possible scenarios for the end of the factional feud.

### **Introduction**

In just over six years, Nigeria's Boko Haram movement transformed from a band of radical preachers to a brutal group that in 2014 acquired the infamous title of the "world's deadliest terrorist organisation". (1) Its rapid transformation owes partly to the nature of Nigerian state repression of the July 2009 revolt, during which some of the group's members and its charismatic leader, Mohammed Yusuf, was killed extra-judicially in police custody. (2) However, the major factor was the emergence of Yusuf's hardline deputy, Abubakar Shekau, as the group's spiritual leader. Under Shekau's brutal leadership, the Boko Harm has sustained a deadly insurgency that overwhelmingly targeted civilians. The seven-year insurgency has claimed at least 20,000 lives, displaced more than 2.6 million people, created over 75, 000 orphans and caused about \$9 billion worth of damage since 2009.

In March 2015, Shekau swore allegiance to the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Daesh, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. The Daesh leader endorsed the alliance

calling Boko Haram 'our jihadi brothers'. (3) Boko Haram was quickly rebranded as the Wilāyat al-Islāmiyya Gharb Afrīqiyyah or the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). Although the ISWAP has remained a 'united' force since then, crack in its leadership came to light in June 2016 when US General, Thomas Waldhauser, claimed that Boko Haram have fractured internally, with a large group splitting away from Shekau over his failure to adhere to guidance from the Daesh. (4)

In August 2016, the crack became very obvious when the Daesh named Abu Musab al-Barnawi, as the new leader of Boko Haram. The long-time leader of the group, Abubakar Shekau, denied he had been replaced and vowed to continue the insurgency. This report examines the recent split within the Boko Haram 'terrorist' group. It discusses the reason(s) behind the leadership split, highlights the implications of the factional feud for the future of Islamic jihadism in the Lake Chad region, and construct four possible scenarios for the end of the leadership rift.

### **The Current Leadership Split within Boko Haram**

On 2 August 2016, the Daesh in its propaganda magazine Al-Naba named Abu Musab al-Barnawi as the new Wali or leader of ISWAP. Experts believe that al-Barnawi is the son of Boko Haram's original founder, Mohammed Yusuf, and was previously the spokesman of Boko Haram under Shekau. Shortly after his nomination, al-Barnawi made a caustic rejection of Shekau's leadership, lambasting him for targeting ordinary Muslims and promising to concentrate attacks largely on Christians.

The designation infuriated Shekau, who released an audio message on 4 August insisting he is still the leader of Boko Haram. He claimed in the audio that he was deceived, and denounced al-Barnawi as an infidel. As shekau puts it: "I was deceived but all I know is that al-Barnawi and whoever is with him are infidels. I will never stray from the ideology of the Jama'atu Ahl as-Sunnah li-Da'awati wal-Jihad, which has its basis in the Quran". (5)

Shekau's outburst triggered a propaganda tirade between the two jihadi leaders. On 6 August, al-Barnawi's faction with the support of Mamman Nur released an audio message denouncing Shekau as a hypocrite and coward. They claimed that Shekau was ousted because of various offences, including the killing of fellow Muslims and living in luxury while his fighters starved.

Analysts believe that Shekau and Nur have been locked in a factional feud, each sending audios behind-the-scenes to Daesh condemning one another. (6) As with past infighting since Shekau assumed leadership, the current leadership split is primarily driven by ideological cum tactical differences between Shekau and those who oppose his takfirist approach to Islamic jihadism. Shekau has made his jihadi-ideological position clear:

I am against the principle where someone will dwell in the society with the infidels without making public his opposition or anger against the infidels publicly as it is stated in the Qur'an. Anyone doing that can't be a Muslim, thick and thin. This is what our ideology proved and that is where I stand. (7)

Based on this conviction, Shekau's Boko Haram makes no distinction between Christians or Muslims. He has ordered and justified suicide bombings that have repeatedly targeted mosques, churches, markets and bus stations, as well as intermittent raids that resulted in the killing, maiming, kidnapping and displacement of thousands of civilians. One of such high-profile incidents was the 14 April 2014 kidnapping of more than 250 schoolgirls from Chibok, majority of whom still remain in Boko Haram captivity.

The Al Barnawi's faction strongly disagrees with Shekau's takfirist stance. In their critique of Shekau, Mamman Nur captured their ideological position in these very words: In the Qur'an, Allah forbids Muslims from killing one another...and He also taught against killing in secret. If it is a serious punishment, it must be public for people to know and witness it. But once you see killings in secret, there is something fishy, and this is what we noticed with Shekau. (8)

To this end, Nur's and al-Barnawi's factions criticise Shekau for indiscriminate killing of Muslim, while accusing him of sacrileges that affected the sanctity of their jihadist campaign thereby allowing military forces to record successes against them in the battlefield. The apparent contradiction of al-Benarwi being part of Daesh that itself extols takfirism is predicated on his vision, ambition and conviction that the attainment of a Caliphate in West Africa is very possible under Daesh's 'saltationist' approach than under al-Qaeda's 'gradualist' approach to Islamic jihadism. (9) Thus difference over 'whom' to kill and 'how' to kill, coupled with its impact on the sanctity of their jihadi insurgency underpinned the latest leadership feud within the Boko Haram.

## **Implications of Factionalism for Jihadi Insurgency**

The implications of the recent factional feud will manifest in different shades. Violent confrontation and struggle for the control of turfs between the rival factions are the

obvious implications of the feud. In their struggle for dominance, each faction will try to maximise every opportunity to gain and consolidate territory, route, resources and followers. While the Daesh-backed al-Barnawi faction controls most of northern part of Borno State, which shares borders with Niger, Chad and Cameroon along the shores of the Lake Chad, Shekau's faction is dominant in the central and southern parts of the state, where the large swathes of the Sambisa forest are located. Violent confrontation between these factions can heighten civilian harm.

The factionalism could further complicate the landscape of insecurity and insurgency in the Lake Chad region. Consistent with its ideological linings, the al-Barnawi factions may focus greater attention (kidnapping, attacks and raids) on targeting Christians and other locations or population centres that play host to Westerners. The Shekau faction will continue with his indiscriminate killing of Christians and Muslims alike, sparing only its followers. This would sustain violence in Nigeria and neighbouring countries, particularly in Niger, Chad and Cameroun.

Furthermore, the al-Barnawi's group could attempt to leverage its longstanding links to Daesh to draw former Boko Haram and foreign fighters fleeing Libya to swell its ranks. (10) This could accentuate the foreign fighter element in the region and deepen rivalry among other groups for the control of the lucrative Lake Chad Region trade and smuggling routes. (11)

The leadership split could complicate challenges of rescuing most of the over 200 Chibok girls that were abducted by the insurgents on 14 August 2014. This is because each of the faction is believed to be in possession of some of the Chibok girls and can only release them on their own terms. For instance, Shekau released a video on 13 August to prove that his faction is in possession of a large chunk of the Chibok girls. Shekau's long-time ally, Abu Zinnira indicated in the video their willingness to swap the girls for imprisoned Boko Haram fighters. (12)

## **Future Scenarios**

The recent leadership feud has attracted commentary from analysts, with little or no attention on extrapolating possible scenarios for the end of the rift. Four major scenarios could play out (see table 1).

Possible Scenarios over the Recent Split in Boko Haram - CRDC

Scenarios	Caption	Description	Driver(s)	Level of Probability
<b>Scenario One</b>	Confrontation	Armed and violent clashes between members of rival faction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Deep ideological differences</li> <li>▪ Clash of ego</li> <li>▪ Shift in loyalty by fighters</li> </ul>	Most Probable
<b>Scenario Two</b>	Reconciliation	Rapprochement leading to one surrendering and being absolved into the other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Loss of manpower and resources to COIN operations</li> <li>▪ Mediation by foreign 'terrorist' ideologues</li> </ul>	Very probable
<b>Scenario Three</b>	Dissolution	Further internal fracturing of either or both groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Deprivation and defeat in battlefield</li> <li>▪ Loss of key leaders</li> <li>▪ Forced conscripts willing to escape or surrender</li> </ul>	Probable
<b>Scenario Four</b>	Conspiracy	Betrayal of rival group to gain local/state support or sympathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mutual suspicion</li> <li>▪ Infiltration of the factions by security moles</li> </ul>	Less probable

(Authors own)

*Scenario One:* The first possible scenario is that of confrontation, marked by violent clashes between fighters of the two factions. Experts have speculated that the leadership split could most probably lead to skirmishes between the rival factions. Factors such as deep ideological differences, clash of ego and shift in loyalty can underpin the outbreak of violent confrontation between the group. The tone of Al-Barnawi's faction in their August 6 audio message stating that "we would challenge anyone that challenges us", suggests a formation prepared to engage the Shekau's faction in gun battle. This scenario is most probable and already playing out. There were reports of sporadic deadly clashes between the two factions in the villages of Abadam, Arafa, Monguno, Yele, and Zuwa, in Nigeria's remote northeast in late August and early September 2016. (13) Shekau's faction reportedly suffered most of the casualty. Sustained violent confrontation could lead to total decimation of one faction by the other.

*Scenario Two:* The next scenario is one that could end in reconciliation. As sustained counterinsurgency (COIN) operations by national and regional military forces engender losses in fighters and resources to both factions, their leaders could be compelled to radically reconsider their rivalry to avoid eventual annihilation by state forces. In such a

situation, mediation by foreign 'terrorist' ideologues could facilitate a negotiated settlement. This situation is very probable given that Daesh would wish for a united ISWAP to compensate for its recent loss of fighters and territory in other footholds across Africa, particularly in Libya. Also, despite the differences between the Shekau and Al Barnawi as well as Nur factions, indications are that their allegiance to Al Baghdadi as the Caliph is unshaken. (14) This offers an adhesive that Daesh or other ideologues can use to glue together the various factions.

*Scenario Three:* The third scenario, dissolution, is where factors such as sustained military onslaught and eventual loss of a faction's leader or top commanders would lead to further fragmentation. This would give rise to the emergence of smaller splinter groups that could pose limited threat or may fizzle out with time. This situation is probable given that the decapitation of leaders in some 'terrorist' or insurgent groups either lead to their replacement with another militant or the groups fragment into smaller, harder to detect groups that tend to fight themselves as much as their common enemy. (15) These smaller groups under new leadership could continue the insurgency, mutate into another group or get assimilated into a broader movement. In such a situation, the feud may burn off naturally.

*Scenario Four:* Another scenario is that of conspiracy. This is a situation where leaders or supporters of a faction betray the rival group by revealing vital information about them to other actors or state forces in its desire to gain local support or undermine the existence of the group. An analyst has speculated that betrayal by one or both factions may explain the series of bombing in late August around Sambisa Forest as well as Abadam, Mobbar or Kukuwa by the Nigeria Airforce targeted at destroying the leadership of both factions simultaneously, particularly Shekau. (16) Given that national and regional coalition forces as well as Civilian JTF make no distinction between al-Benawi and Shekau's faction, the potential for conspiracy to occur is less probable since the outcome bodes ill for both the betraying and the betrayed faction. More so, should any of the faction engages in such infamy, it will trigger a spin of betrayal qua betrayal that could end in mutual assured destruction of both factions. Notwithstanding, the potential for betrayal cannot be entirely ruled out.

## **Conclusion**

Infighting is nothing fundamentally new to the Boko Haram. The group has always had competing factions led by powerful local commanders who sometimes disagree over doctrine, targets and tactics of Islamic jihadism. However, the resort to violent

confrontations that marks the latest factional feud bodes ill for the Boko Haram. The existence of several factions will further complicate the security environment in the Lake Chad region, as several scenarios play out in the months ahead. It is too early to conclude precisely on how the factional feud will end, but the development holds positive outcomes for security and stability in the region if national and regional forces can capitalise on the current rift to further neutralise either or both factions. Infiltrating the ranks of Boko Haram by state security forces has proven very difficult, but the recent leadership crack offers a pin-hole for injecting some toxins to make the group's future bleak.

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- 7 Idris, Op Cit.
- 8 Ibid
- 9 I used saltationist in its political sense as the opposite of gradualist. See J. Zenn, (2016) "Making sense of Boko Haram's different factions: Who, how and why?" African Arguments, 20 September, <http://africanarguments.org/2016/09/20/making-sense-of-boko-harams-different-factions/>
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- 16 On 23 August 2016, the Nigerian military claimed that Shekau had been "fatally wounded" in an airstrike. It has several times claimed to have killed Shekau in the past only to be proven wrong, as the latest effort also turned out to be.