



BOKO HARAM

Quick Facts

Geographical Areas of Operation: Northern Nigeria, northern Cameroon, Lake Chad Basin, and southeast Niger.

Numerical Strength (Members): Membership is estimated to be several thousand.

Leadership: Abu Musab al-Barnawi

Religious Identification: Sunni Islam

Source: U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism (2016)

INTRODUCTION

Boko Haram is an Islamist militant group based in northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. In 2015, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State, and Boko Haram became known as “Islamic State’s West Africa Province” (ISWAP). In August 2016, the Islamic State ousted Shekau from his leadership position in ISWAP in favor of another candidate. Thereafter, Shekau revived Boko Haram as a separate entity. ISWAP now operates in the same general region of northeastern Nigeria as Boko Haram, although there are major ideological barriers to collaboration between the two factions.

Boko Haram traces its ideological origins to the Nigerian Salafi imam Mohammed Yusuf. Yusuf was killed during a Boko Haram uprising in 2009. Abubakar Shekau was Yusuf’s deputy during the latter’s lifetime, and his successor after his death. When the Islamic State demoted Shekau in August 2016 as a result of a feud in ISWAP’s ranks, the Islamic State named Abu Musab al-Barnawi, Yusuf’s son, as Shekau’s successor. Al-Barnawi still leads ISWAP today.

Under Yusuf, Boko Haram sought to create an Islamic State in northern Nigeria based on the model of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the teachings of Saudi Salafi preachers. However, it was not until Shekau took power in 2009 that Boko Haram began to truly use the international connections with al-Qaeda that Yusuf had built behind-the-scenes during his lifetime. Soon after, Boko Haram began to gain legitimacy in the international jihadist community.

In 2014, Boko Haram announced an “Islamic State” in areas under its control in northeastern Nigeria. This announcement heralded the final break in relations with al-Qaeda over long-standing ideological differences between Shekau and the Bin Laden network’s regional franchise, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), as well as with AQIM-trained Nigerian fighters. It was also a harbinger of growing ties with between Boko Haram and the Islamic State—a relationship that would culminate with Shekau’s public pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi in March 2015. Al-Baghdadi accepted the pledge amid great fanfare among various Islamic State provinces. However, a combined Nigerian and regional military offensive subsequently forced Boko Haram to abandon territories it had conquered in northeastern Nigeria, and caused Shekau’s self-declared state to collapse.

At the same time, the larger Islamic State also faced pressure from national armies, rival rebels, and international forces in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. That pressure limited the extent to which the Islamic State could support new provinces, such as ISWAP. These pressures have limited direct operational coordination, although the Islamic State has fully integrated its media operation with that of ISWAP and considers ISWAP an “official” province. However, since the election of Abu Musab al-Barnawi, media coordination between the Islamic State and ISWAP has declined, indicating that the relationship has become even more stressed—and is perhaps unsustainable in the long run.

In joining the Islamic State, Shekau lived up to Yusuf’s belief that an Islamic state “should be established in Nigeria, and if possible all over the world,” but there were differences between the two men’s ideologies.¹ Shekau’s emphasis was mostly on militancy and jihadism with immediacy, while Yusuf combined preaching with more clandestine preparations for jihad, such as by receiving pledges of loyalty from young Nigerians who had trained with AQIM in the Sahel and who promised to return and fight in a jihad in Nigeria when the time was right.² Once that jihad began in July 2009, it led to a confrontation that culminated in Yusuf’s death.³

ISWAP under al-Barnawi has already evolved from being a local threat to a sub-regional threat, with attacks in Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. There are signs that ISWAP not only has networks throughout Africa and beyond, as evidenced by its relationship with the larger Islamic State, but that it has operational cells in Senegal and other West African countries as well.⁴ Meanwhile, Shekau’s Boko Haram may not have the strong regional and global connections that al-Barnawi’s ISWAP now has, but it nonetheless still operates throughout the Lake Chad sub-region and represents a significant threat in northeastern Nigeria.

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

Mohammed Yusuf led Boko Haram from 2002 to 2009, and the main tenet of his teaching was that Western education is sinful, which in Hausa translates to “Boko Haram” (Boko can mean “Book” or, more broadly, “Western education,” and Haram means “sinful” or “forbidden”). Yusuf also taught that employment in the Nigerian government and participation in democracy was haram for Muslims, because Nigeria was not an Islamic State. He also preached that other activities, such as sports or listening to music, were haram because they could lead to idol worship.⁵

Yusuf’s estimated 280,000 followers, who hailed from Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, either listened to his sermons in-person or on audiocassettes. They became known in northern Nigeria and abroad as the “Nigerian Taliban” because of their adherence to the theology of the Taliban in Afghanistan, which Nigerian Taliban members cited as their source of inspiration along with Osama bin Laden.⁶ Yusuf’s anti-Western and anti-education ideology appealed to many northern Nigerian Muslims who believed Nigeria was losing its Muslim identity to Western influence and Christianity, and who saw sharia as a panacea to the “corrupt” secular and democratic society they lived in.

Before the British colonial period (1850 – 1960), a large swath of northern Nigeria, southern Niger and Cameroon was under the rule of the Sokoto Caliphate (1804 – 1903), while Nigeria’s Borno and Yobe States and parts of northern Cameroon, southeastern Niger and western Chad were under the rule of the Borno Empire (1380 – 1893). The British disbanded both of these Muslim empires and established the Northern Nigeria Protectorate in 1900, which later became part of colonial Nigeria in 1914, and then part of independent Nigeria in 1960. Colonization brought with it British education, including the English language, Western schools, and Christian missionaries. By the time of Nigeria’s independence in 1960, southern Nigeria, where British influence was strongest, was economically more powerful and had higher levels of education than the country’s north. Moreover, its population, which was largely animist before the arrival of the British, was by 1960 predominantly Christian. Northern Nigeria, on the other hand, was and remains predominantly Muslim, although since independence the influence of Islamic practices from

Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, such as Salafism and Shiism, have become among the most prominent features of northern Nigerian Islam, and have heavily influenced the doctrines of Muhammed Yusuf and his followers.

When democracy was instituted in Nigeria in 1999 after several failed attempts at political liberalization, some northern Nigerian Muslims saw democracy as a byproduct of American influence and a ploy that would lead to the marginalization of northern Nigerian Muslims or the dilution of the Islamic identity of the region.⁷ As a result, twelve states in northern Nigeria have adopted sharia law since 1999. But Salafists like Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf considered this to be only “half-sharia,” because the framework was not imposed throughout the entire country and traditional Islamic leaders still mixed sharia with secular institutions like electoral democracy and co-educational schooling. Moreover, sharia was rarely actually employed; in cases where it was, only the poor ended up being punished.⁸

As a result of this perception of weakened Islamic identity and diluted Islam, Yusuf’s rallying cry when he became the deputy of Boko Haram in 2002 was to advocate the creation of a true Islamic state and the elimination of all forms of Western influence and education.⁹ According to Yusuf, for a short-lived period in 2003, several thousand members of the Nigerian Taliban, “left the city, which is impure, and headed for the bush, believing that Muslims who do not share their ideology are infidels.”¹⁰ They called their encampment, which was located two miles from Nigeria’s border with Niger, “Afghanistan.”

The local government ordered the Nigerian Taliban to leave “Afghanistan” in late 2003. Although it is unclear exactly what transpired at this time, it appears that the government cracked down on the camp after it learned that the camp was more than the “simple commune” it has often been portrayed to be.¹¹ Rather, key commanders at the camp had forged an alliance with al-Qaeda’s external operations unit leader for Africa, Ibrahim Harun, to train to attack U.S. targets in Nigeria ahead of the U.S. presidential elections.¹² When two deputies of the camp traveled to Pakistan to provide “coded messages... on how to carry out terrorist activities against American interests in Nigeria,” they were intercepted by Pakistani intelligence and deported them back to Nigeria.¹³ Not only did the Nigerian government want to prevent attacks on U.S. targets; leading Nigerian Salafi scholars, who at least tacitly supported the camp, did as well. The leading Nigerian Salafi scholars may have accepted some military training for camp members for fighting in the jihads in Iraq and Afghanistan but opposed any violence domestically in Nigeria. They believed local insurgency would ultimately lead to crackdowns that would harm Muslims. In this context, leading Salafi scholars are believed to have cooperated with the government in its crackdown on the camp, which occurred in early 2004. Several hundred members of the Nigerian Taliban, including its military leader Muhammed Ali, were killed, while the residences of local government leaders, regional officials, and the divisional police were attacked.¹⁴ Ultimately, security forces succeeded in destroying the entire “Afghanistan” camp.

In late 2004, Yusuf succeeded Muhammed Ali as leader of the group that was still called the Nigerian Taliban and under Yusuf’s leadership would later become known as Boko Haram. Yusuf took the helm after a year of exile in Saudi Arabia, only returning when northern Nigerian politicians assured him he would not be harmed if he came back. For the next five years, Yusuf’s followers generally avoided conflict with the Nigerian government and security forces. However, Yusuf himself still preached against the government and declared that his group would launch a jihad once they had enough power to succeed. This relative hiatus came to an end in July 2009, when Yusuf’s followers and security forces engaged in battles in Borno and several other states in northeastern Nigeria for the span of four days. As a result of these clashes, police captured Yusuf and executed him extra-judicially. More than 700 of his followers were also killed.¹⁵

While the government and Yusuf’s followers blamed each other for instigating the clashes, conflict may have been inevitable given Yusuf’s rising popularity in northeastern Nigeria. His popularity, combined with his rejection of the legitimacy of the Nigerian state; his sermons encouraging his followers

to hoard weapons in preparation for battle; and his establishment of training and financial contacts with al-Qaeda during the mid-2000s; all made Yusuf a credible and serious threat. The rapid expansion of the militant capabilities of Yusuf's followers beginning in 2010 also attested to the training they received from al-Qaeda. That training could not have happened if Yusuf had not forged alliances with al-Qaeda, especially AQIM, throughout the mid-2000s. Shekau continued to strengthen those ties in the year after Yusuf's death. He sent three of Yusuf's followers, including longtime Nigerian AQIM operative Khalid al-Barnawi, to meet with Abu Zeid, the AQIM commander for the Sahel, to carry out consultations about launching a guerilla war in Nigeria.¹⁶ Abu Zeid, who had known all three of them from prior battles and training, then requested financial and logistical support from the overall leader of AQIM, Abudelmalek Droukdel—a request which Droukdel granted.¹⁷

AQIM connected Shekau with Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, so Shekau could explore the process of formally joining al-Qaeda and becoming an affiliate.¹⁸ However, troubles soon arose. AQIM-trained Nigerians, including Khalid al-Barnawi, complained to AQIM about Shekau's excessive violence, including killing anyone—even Muslims—who did not join Boko Haram in the two years after 2009. AQIM leadership attempted to discuss these concerns with Shekau in 2010, but their correspondence went unanswered.¹⁹ After this snub, AQIM stopped supporting Boko Haram and shifted its resources to a breakaway group called Ansaru when it was founded by al-Barnawi in 2012.²⁰ Al-Qaeda, therefore, never recognized the group that after 2009 was known as Boko Haram as an affiliate during their relative short period of close cooperation (2009 to 2011). However, some AQIM breakaway groups in Mali, such as Ansar Dine, continued to cooperate with Shekau and trained Boko Haram members even after 2012.

Relations between Shekau and AQIM soured by 2012, but by then Shekau had already accumulated a large enough following that he was able to survive and maintain strength even without AQIM's support. Many of Yusuf's followers went underground in Nigeria or took refuge in Niger, Chad and Cameroon, all of which border Nigeria's northeastern Borno State. In July 2010, Shekau, who Nigerian security forces believed had been killed in the July 2009 clashes, emerged via a video statement to declare himself Boko Haram's new leader. His video message was issued "on behalf of my mujahideen brothers in some African territory called Nigeria... to the soldiers of Allah in the Islamic State of Iraq in particular." It warned that: "Jihad has just begun... O America, die with your fury."²¹ On October 2, 2010, AQIM's media wing, al-Andalus, also published a statement by Shekau to the Shumukh al-Islam jihadist web forum, which marked the first time that AQIM disseminated an official message from another militant leader or group. In the message, Shekau offered "glad tidings" and mourned the deaths of two al-Qaeda in Iraq leaders and offered: "condolences on behalf of the Mujahideen in Nigeria to the Mujahideen in general, in particular to those in the "Islamic State of Iraq, Osama bin Laden, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Abu Yahya Al-Libi, Abu Abdullah Al-Muhajir, the Emir of the Islamic State in Somalia, the Emir of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Emir of the Mujahideen in Pakistan, in Chechnya, Kashmir, Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula, and our religious clerics whom I did not mention."²² After Khalid al-Barnawi's meeting with Abu Zeid, AQIM also published statements supporting Shekau in August 2009 and again in 2010, thus serving as a formal "welcome" from (albeit not affiliation with) al-Qaeda. Furthermore, al-Qaeda in Iraq and al-Shabab also issued condolences to Boko Haram on the one-year anniversary of Yusuf's death.

Shekau remained the leader of Boko Haram from 2010 through his pledge of allegiance of al-Baghdadi in March 2015, and then served as leader of ISWAP until August 2016. At that time, the Islamic State endorsed a rival faction under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Barnawi, and Shekau was deposed. Abu Musab Al-Barnawi's faction's criticisms of Shekau in 2016 mirrored Khalid al-Barnawi's complaints from 2010.²³ This transition of power was made public in the Islamic State's announcement on August 3, 2016 that the new wali (governor) of ISWAP was Abu Musab al-Barnawi. Shekau, in turn, reverted back to his pre-ISWAP title of "imam" of Boko Haram (Jamaatu ahlis Sunna li'Dawati wal Jihad), while still maintaining his loyalty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as Caliph. Since 2016, ISWAP and Boko Haram have

been in rivalry with each other due to their disparate ideologies, and continue to comprise the two main jihadist factions in Nigeria.

GLOBAL REACH

Boko Haram's attacks have largely been confined to the Lake Chad region of Africa, including attacks in northern Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. In Nigeria itself, Boko Haram's attacks have been concentrated in the country's north, especially Borno State. Bombings in the wider Middle Belt region have become increasingly rare since the loss of AQIM support in 2010.

In April 2012, Boko Haram militants, including Shekau, were reportedly in northern Mali with the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), AQIM, and Ansar al-Dine when the Islamist militias established the "Islamic State of Azawad" in northern Mali.²⁴ Boko Haram fighters were reported to have taken part in an attack on the Algerian consulate in April 2012, but there is little evidence to corroborate that report.²⁵ A video issued by Mokhtar Belmokhtar and MUJWA after attacks in Arlit and Agadez in June 2013, however, featured a member of Ansaru—suggesting that it may have been Ansaru, rather than Boko Haram, which played the greater operational role in the original attack on the consulate.²⁶

A French-led military intervention eventually expelled the Islamist militants, including Boko Haram and Ansaru fighters, from northern Mali in early 2013.²⁷ After the French-led military intervention, some Boko Haram members returned to northern Nigeria and used similar desert warfare tactics to overrun Nigerian military barracks throughout Borno State.²⁸ This allowed Boko Haram to become the de-facto military power in large swathes of Borno State in 2014 and provided grounding for Shekau's announcement the same year that Boko Haram had succeeded in establishing an "Islamic State." The videos carried the same visual signatures of the Islamic State's own releases and hinted that a pledge from Shekau to al-Baghdadi was in the making.²⁹ Boko Haram's control over territory and its new tactics, such as kidnapping and enslaving more than 250 schoolgirls from Chibok, Nigeria, impressed the Islamic State and facilitated the eventual establishment of ISWAP. Boko Haram also employs female suicide bombers more than other similar groups, in part because women are less likely to be considered a threat. Between 2014 and the end of 2017, Boko Haram carried out over 250 female suicide bombings (often in tandem or trios) in Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon.³⁰

Coinciding with Boko Haram's merger with the Islamic State in March 2015, Nigeria and regional militaries from Niger, Chad and Cameroon launched incursions into northeastern Nigeria to oust the group from the territories it controlled. This, in turn, led Boko Haram to retaliate against all of these countries. In February 2015, Boko Haram sent a tandem of a male and female suicide bombers to attack Diffa, Niger. In June 2015, Boko Haram sent two suicide bombers to N'djamena, Chad to attack government buildings. The Islamic State later claimed those operations.³¹ Later, two other suicide attackers targeted markets in N'djamena, while other suicide bombers, often female, began to target islands in Lake Chad with regularity. Cameroon had been a target of Boko Haram as early as 2014, even before the regional military offensive against the group. By 2015, Boko Haram was targeting Cameroon's northern region as frequently as northern Nigeria, again also primarily using women as suicide bombers.³²

Such attacks gradually decreased in 2016 or were neutralized by successful counter-terrorism operations.³³ Furthermore, Cameroon's large-scale counterinsurgency efforts rolled back Boko Haram attacks in the country by 2016. Chad, too, managed to mitigate further Boko Haram attacks in that country by 2016, in part through "non-aggression pacts" with Boko Haram in which the Chadian military would not attack the group across the border so long as Boko Haram did not attack Chad. Niger, too, saw reduced Boko Haram attacks, but after the split between Abu Musab al-Barnawi and Shekau, al-Barnawi launched several large-scale ISWAP operations in Diffa and Bosso in the country's southeast. A June 2016 raid by more than 100 ISWAP militants, for example, destroyed military barracks in Bosso.³⁴ ISWAP filmed this attack in a video entitled "Invading Niger: Scenes from Liberating the Nigerien Apostate Army Camp in

the Area of Bosso.”³⁵ ISWAP released the video via the Islamic State’s media channels in July 2016, and seems to have done so in anticipation of—and as a promotion for—Abu Musab al-Barnawi’s impending ascension to ISWAP’s leadership position.

ISWAP established cells in Senegal in 2015 and 2016.³⁶ There were also approximately 100 Nigerians and several dozen Senegalese fighting with the Islamic State in Libya.³⁷ This presence gave the group a significant operational capability; with Abu Musab al-Barnawi’s more internationally connected ISWAP faction now in charge of these regional relationships, ISWAP could activate cells of Nigerian and Senegalese ex-foreign fighters in Libya. Activating those cells would launch ISWAP’s first attack outside of the Lake Chad region. However, ISWAP concentrated its attacks almost exclusively to Borno State and southern Niger from late 2016 to 2018.

There are no signs at this time that ISWAP is planting cells in Europe in preparation for attacks. Rather, the Islamic State has used its Syrian and, increasingly, Libyan network for this function.

RECENT ACTIVITY

From the time of Shekau’s pledge to al-Baghdadi in March 2015 until August 3, 2016, the formerly bombastic Shekau was not seen publicly in any video or propaganda material, although the Islamic State still recognized him as its wali (governor). During this time, Shekau and his former rival for Boko Haram leadership, Mamman Nur—as well as Nur’s ally, Abu Musab al-Barnawi—were locked in a factional feud, with the two of them publishing behind-the-scenes audios condemning one another.³⁸ Moreover, as Abu Musab al-Barnawi controlled the communications between the Islamic State and the ISWAP, he was able to cut off Shekau—which explains the latter’s absence from media even while he was “governor” of ISWAP.

Shekau was forced to back down after Abu Musab al-Barnawi’s condemnations of Shekau, and the Islamic State announced on August 3, 2016 that Abu Musab al-Barnawi had become the new “governor” of ISWAP.³⁹ In an audio clip released on YouTube just after his demotion, Shekau announced that he was reverting to his former position and declared himself imam of Boko Haram, thus signaling that he had left ISWAP.⁴⁰ On August 7, Boko Haram also released a video on YouTube for the first time since Shekau returned to his role as imam. In the video, Shekau declared that Boko Haram would refuse to follow Abu Musab al-Barnawi because he did not adhere to “authentic Salafism.” In subsequent videos issued since September 2016, Shekau reiterated that Boko Haram was still loyal to al-Baghdadi and considers itself part of the Islamic State (even though the Islamic State only recognized ISWAP and not Boko Haram). Shekau also claimed that his militants would continue jihad regardless of their affiliation.⁴¹ Furthermore, Shekau condemned the electoral victory of the “pagan” and “homosexual” Donald Trump over the “prostitute” Hillary Clinton in the November 2016 U.S. presidential election, thus making clear that the U.S. remains a target of his animus.⁴² In the first months of 2017, Shekau’s videos continued to feature Islamic State-style imagery, began to feature French-speaking fighters, and criticized Nigerian Salafis who—Boko Haram argues—chose the Nigerian government over “Muhammed Yusuf’s blood.”⁴³ Shekau also showed pragmatism in his decision to return 83 of the Chibok schoolgirls in May 2017 after a breakaway commander returned 21 girls in October 2016. Although the Nigerian government it claimed that it only exchanged prisoners for the Chibok captives, one of the prisoners said in a Boko Haram video that the Nigerian government paid ransoms for the girls as well.⁴⁴ This demonstrates that Boko Haram under Shekau still has a diversified messaging strategy and a level of pragmatism not often recognized as being one of his core characteristics.

The leadership change nonetheless makes ISWAP’s future likely to be more regional than that of JAS, especially with regard to its potential for expansion in West Africa. Both Nur and Abu Musab al-Barnawi are far more internationally connected than is Shekau, and they are now the top figures in ISWAP. This position could prompt them to launch an attack outside the Lake Chad region. If the organization manages

to successfully orchestrate attacks outside its home base, its power in the jihadi world and already-significant notoriety will only grow. Meanwhile, if ISWAP begins to take on a more regional dimension, it could open up opportunities for Shekau and his faction to reclaim the mantle of jihad in Nigeria itself. In essence, ISWAP could evolve into a more regional militant group while Boko Haram limits its focus to Nigeria alone.

ISWAP's main strength is that it is versatile and carries out operations throughout the Lake Chad region, especially Niger, and is not limited to a particular territorial base. Boko Haram, in contrast, has increasingly consolidated around Sambisa Forest since 2016 under Shekau's leadership.⁴⁵ And although ISWAP does not have Boko Haram's level of grassroots membership, it nonetheless maintains a significant contingent of fighters, because many fighters who were originally in Boko Haram defected to and remained in ISWAP. One of ISWAP's key strategies is to not antagonize or torment the local population, in order to minimize the latter's cooperation with the Nigerian military. Locals who do cooperate with authorities, however, are killed.⁴⁶ This strategy has helped ISWAP control parts of northern Borno State since 2014 with little popular revolt. The group has also established consistent funding streams from taxing cattle herders, farmers, and fishermen—taxes that are levied in return for local stability.

One of the prototypical examples of how ISWAP differs from Boko Haram took place in February 2018, when a faction of ISWAP, which was likely comprised of defectors from Shekau, kidnapped 111 girls from a school in Yobe State. When they brought the girls to Abu Musab al-Barnawi's hideout near Lake Chad, he demanded the girls be returned to their families – except for the one Christian girl who could only return to her family if she converted to Islam.⁴⁷ According to al-Barnawi, it was unacceptable to kidnap Muslims for religious reasons, but also because it could alienate them from the broader Muslim support base in northeastern Nigeria.⁴⁸ In March 2018, ISWAP delivered the 105 girls (all but the Christian girl and five girls who had died during the kidnapping itself) back to their villages after coming to a “safe corridor” agreement with the Nigerian government. This did not, however, presage a broader ceasefire with the government.

One of ISWAP's possible weaknesses, however, is that it is affiliated with the Islamic State, whose network is weak in the Sahel and increasingly struggling in Iraq and Syria, as well as in Libya. AQIM, by contrast, has become preminent in the Sahel once again. Nevertheless, this does not appear to have reduced ISWAP's loyalty to the Islamic State. Abu Musab al-Barnawi has continued to deliver sermons to followers based on the Islamic State's theological materials, and has shown no signs of breaking from the group despite its current struggles elsewhere.⁴⁹ This suggests that, for Barnawi, loyalty may supersede the operational benefits that would come along with closer coordination with AQIM.

ENDNOTES

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