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Boko Haram Factionalization: Who are Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) Fighters in Niger and Chad? Terrorism Monitor Volume: 17 Issue: 12

In March, the *shura* (consultative council) of Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) released an audio recording announcing Abdullah Ibn Umar al-Barnawi (a.k.a. "Ba Idrisa") as ISWAP's new leader (Twitter.com/A_Salkida, (https://twitter.com/A_Salkida/status/1102689629340426241) March 4). [1] Ba Idrisa had formerly been a follower of Muhammed Yusuf, who was the group's leader from 2004 until his death at the hands of the Nigerian security forces in July 2009. Ba Idrisa then stood by Muhammed Yusuf's son, Abu Musab al-Barnawi ("Habib Yusuf") seven years later when al-Barnawi deposed then ISWAP leader and Muhammed Yusuf's successor, Abubakar Shekau, from the leadership position in August 2016 (Sahara Reporters, (<http://saharareporters.com/2016/08/05/new-boko-haram-leader-al-barnawi-accuses-abubakar-shekau-killing-fellow-muslims-living>) August 5, 2016). This means Ba Idrisa is the third ISWAP leader, following Shekau and Abu Musab al-Barnawi, and arguably betrays the legacy of the late Muhammed Yusuf by dethroning his son in March.

Abubakar Shekau, for his part, has since August 2016 returned to leading the Sunni Muslim Group for Preaching and Jihad (*Jamaat Ahl as-Sunnah Lid Dawa wa al-Jihad*-JAS), which is commonly called "Boko Haram" ("Western education is blasphemous" in Hausa language). JAS had been the group's formal name from the time when Shekau succeeded Muhammed Yusuf in 2010 until Shekau pledged loyalty to Islamic State (IS) in March 2015 and JAS rebranded as ISWAP. Ba Idrisa and Shekau are now, in theory, rivals, with the former leading ISWAP and the latter leading JAS.

However, ISWAP attack trends since Ba Idrisa's ascendancy to leadership in March suggest ISWAP may develop a more cooperative relationship with Shekau than the group had with him under Abu Musab al-Barnawi's leadership. As an example of this animus, after Shekau and his now deceased deputy, Man Chari, were demoted from ISWAP leadership in August 2016, they complained publicly in a video that al-Barnawi was a "polytheist" and "lacking any qualifications" (Jihadology, (<https://jihadology.net/2016/08/07/new-video-message-from-jamaat-ahl-al-sunnah-li-l-dawah-wa-l-jihads-abu-bakr-shekau-message-from-the-soldiers/>) August 7, 2016). Abu Musab al-Barnawi and his mentor, Mamman Nur, who was formerly Muhammed Yusuf's third-in-command, had themselves "tattle-tailed" on Shekau to the Islamic State about Shekau's violations of Abubakar al-Baghdadi's orders on, among other matters, not "enslaving" Muslim women (Sahara Reporters, (<http://saharareporters.com/2016/08/05/new-boko-haram-leader-al-barnawi-accuses-abubakar-shekau-killing-fellow-muslims-living>) August 5, 2016). On top of that, Abu Musab al-Barnawi and Nur had also cut Shekau off from communications with IS so he could not defend himself.

One reason to suspect there might be a "thaw" in relations between Ba Idrisa and Shekau is that ISWAP attacks in Niger since March have run counter to the group's attack trends when Abu Musab al-Barnawi was the leader. ISWAP's attacks, especially in Niger, in fact, appear to be in line with Shekau's targeting. At the same time, curious ISWAP non-claims of some attacks around Lake Chad in Niger and Chad suggest ISWAP itself is fractured between the Ba Idrisa-led "official" ISWAP and resisters to his leadership who are loyalists of Abu Musab al-Barnawi and cannot or will not claim attacks in ISWAP's name or possibly JAS fighters still operating in ISWAP-dominated areas in Niger and Chad.

March Mayhem in Niger

ISWAP's spate of violence in southeastern Niger under Ba Idrisa's leadership began with two standout attacks on March 5 and 20. The first attack in N'Guagam, Diffa saw ISWAP abduct two women and the second attack in Tchoungowa, Bosso saw ISWAP abduct another four women (Facebook.com/kakatouda.mamanegoni, (<https://www.facebook.com/kakatouda.mamanegoni>) March 20). ISWAP had previously generally abstained from abductions of women (at least if the women were Muslim) under Abu Musab al-Barnawi's leadership, while contrarily Abubakar Shekau has never discontinued the tactic of abducting women. He reportedly has 700 abductees under his control, including several dozen of the remaining Chibok schoolgirls, who have been "married off" to fighters over their more than five years in custody (Salkida.com, (<https://salkida.com/corps-member-hundreds-more-nigerians-rot-in-boko-haram-custody/>) March 3). Meanwhile, there have been around 30 abductions in Diffa alone from January to June 2019, with women comprising more than half of the victims (Twitter.com/rmaghrebi, June 13 (<https://twitter.com/rmaghrebi/status/1139160713858035713>)). Also worth mentioning, ISWAP besieged a base in Woulwa near Gueskerou, Diffa and killed five gendarmes on March 8 (Actuniger, March 9 (<https://www.actuniger.com/societe/14928-diffa-5-gendarmes-tues-et-plusieurs-autres-blesses-a-la-suite-de-l-attaque-de-woulwa-gueskerou>)).

The ISWAP attacks in Niger continued on March 21-22, when the group killed eight civilians in another village near Gueskerou after the new Governor of Diffa passed through the area (Facebook.com/kakatouda.mamanegoni, (<https://www.facebook.com/kakatouda.mamanegoni>) March 22). Just days later, on March 23-24, ISWAP attacked another four villages (Alhaji-Mainari, Boula Kiassa, Ngagam, and Kayaa), killing 10 people and then attacked one more village (Dewa Kalgueri), killing eight people (Facebook.com/urgencediffa, (https://www.facebook.com/UrgenceDiffa/?_rdc=1&_rdr) March 25). The attacks in Niger continued again on March 26 when the group carried out its first ever "large-scale operation" in the country, this time in N'guigmi, more than 100 kilometers north of Diffa. In what was considered to be a "turning point," ISWAP killed 14 people there, in addition to the death of a suicide bomber (Facebook.com/urgencediffa, (https://www.facebook.com/UrgenceDiffa/?_rdc=1&_rdr) March 26). Another landmark attack occurred again on March 27, when two reported "kamikazes" attacked a gendarmerie post and killed more than 10 people in N'guigmi (LeFigaro, (<http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/niger-dix-civils-tues-par-boko-haram-dans-une-double-attaque-20190327>) March 27). This latter attack may have been claimed by ISWAP on April 10 as an "inghimasi (immersion by fighting until death)" operation in which the fighters were photographed in front of floral carpets before the operation.

ISWAP attacks in Niger subsided after March but they were still destructive.

For example:

- On April 26, the premises of Médecins Sans Frontières in Maine-Soroa were burned down in an attack later claimed by ISWAP (Actuniger, (<https://www.actuniger.com/societe/15077-diffa-boko>

haram-les-locaux-de-medecins-sans-frontieres-france-msf-a-maine-soraa-incendies-par-des-assaillants-armes) April 26);

- On May 2, ISWAP abducted two young girls and two young boys in Toumour;
- On May 4, ISWAP killed seven people in attacks in Chetimari and Loumbouram (com/TOUTE-Lactualite-SUR-DIFFA, (<https://www.facebook.com/pg/TOUTE-Lactualite-SUR-DIFFA-964477463607425/posts/>) May 4).
- On May 24, ISWAP abducted six people (five men and a girl) near Bosso; and
- On May 29, ISWAP abducted 13 people, including a reported “three married girls” in Toumour (Facebook, (<https://mobile.facebook.com/UrgenceDiffa/>) May 30).
- On June 4-5, ISWAP claimed to have killed more than 50 of the Niger security forces in attacks on the Diffa airport and an oil refinery, although this was likely an exaggeration.

Clearly, at least for what seem to be ISWAP members in Niger, carrying out abductions of women has become non-controversial. This tactical shift might be the result of Ba Idrisa taking over the leadership position from Abu Musab al-Barnawi. The series of kidnappings coincided with his replacing al-Barnawi in March. It should also be noted, however, that citizen-reporters in Bosso reported on March 7, that there was factional infighting between “Shekau’s faction” and “Mamman Nur’s faction” (Facebook.com/IDiDendi, (https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=1868836573128359&story_fbid=2804671346211539) March 8). The latter, of course, refers to Abu Musab al-Barnawi’s mentor, Mamman Nur, but he was purged and killed by ISWAP leadership on the orders of IS in September 2018 (Sahara Reporters, (<http://saharareporters.com/2018/09/14/boko-haram-leader-mamman-nur-killed-his-closest-lieutenants-releasing-dapchi-girls>) September 14, 2018). This is also when al-Barnawi himself first became sidelined and put under house arrest before being dethroned by Ba Idrisa in March. One way to interpret this report about factional clashes in Bosso is that “Shekau-like” ISWAP members under Ba Idrisa’s leadership—who themselves may have been former Shekau loyalists when the group was united—clashed with Abu Musab al-Barnawi loyalists, who themselves may have formerly been Mamman Nur loyalists. Whatever the nature of the clashes, it is worth taking note of the incident in the context of the leadership and tactical shifts of ISWAP in Niger at that same time.

Expanding in Chad

The rapid intensification of ISWAP attacks in Niger demonstrates that the group is expanding beyond its main—and still very active—area of operations in the northeastern area along the Nigerian shoreline with Lake Chad. ISWAP’s range in Niger also had previously been limited to towns bordering Nigeria, such as Bosso, Diffa, Maine-Soraa, and Toumour. However, N’guigmi is much farther north than those towns and was never attacked by ISWAP until this new spate of attacks in Niger. Therefore, ISWAP is entrenching itself farther north in Niger than ever before.

ISWAP’s push northwards in Niger has also been duplicated in its operations in Chad. On June 2, for example, ISWAP reportedly killed the sultan of Bol in Chad. Previously ISWAP operations had been in and around Lake Chad itself, but Bol is much farther north of the lake than the group’s previous attacks.

This indicated ISWAP has, in fact, expanded its operations northwards in Chad (*Alwihda*, (https://www.alwihdainfo.com/Tchad-attaque-de-Boko-Haram-au-Lac-un-goumier-du-sultan-de-Bol-tue_a73669.html) June 2).

Prior to this attack, on May 25, six people and a journalist who intended to report on Chadian soldiers “to boost morale” were also killed in a roadside bomb in N’Gounboua, Chad, and on March 22, ISWAP killed 23 Chadian soldiers in Dangdallah, near Lake Chad (Rfi.fr, (<http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20190322-tchad-23-morts-attaque-boko-haram-armee-tchadienne>) March 22). This Dangdala attack—which was the highest death toll for Chad in any ISWAP attack and prompted Chadian President Idriss Déby to sack one of his top military officers—seems to have been claimed by ISWAP if it was referring to “Dangdallah” as “Belgarm” in a May 27 claim. However, the attacks in Bol and N’Gounboua were not formally claimed by ISWAP. Similarly, none of the abductions of women in Niger were formally claimed by ISWAP and neither was a major attack along Lake Chad in Darak, Cameroon, where 300 fighters reportedly killed 17 soldiers and nine civilians on June 13.

The latter non-claims in Niger make sense in view of IS’ directives to ISWAP not to abduct Muslim women. One might postulate IS will not claim, or ISWAP will not report, its abductions of women in Niger because IS does not approve of them. However, the other attacks in Bol and N’Gounboua, Chad (and possibly Dangdallah) and Darak, Cameroon should be expected to have been claimed by ISWAP. There is obviously nothing “wrong” with them from IS’ perspective. One possibility is that ISWAP carried out the attacks, but a faction far removed from the main media team or Ba Idrisa’s inner-circle carried them out. It is also possible, considering that Ba Idrisa must be highly loyal to IS, that the abductions of women in Niger have been carried out by a faction either inclined towards Shekau or disobedient of Ba Idrisa and IS. Since Abu Musab al-Barnawi loyalists formerly specialized in barracks raids in Niger in 2016, it is also possible his loyalists were involved in some attacks but are not claiming them in ISWAP’s name because of animosity towards Ba Idrisa.

Other Explanations for the “New” ISWAP

The ISWAP surge and expansion in Niger and Chad and the group’s intensity of attacks farther north than its main area of operations in Nigeria might be attributed to the group’s desire to solidify logistic and transit routes to Libya. There are, for example, reports of IS members in Libya traveling down to Nigeria and vice-versa (GICS Report, (<https://conflictstudies.gics.live/2019/04/23/gics-report-survival-and-expansion-the-islamic-states-west-african-province/>) April 23). There are also well-known weapon smuggling routes from Libya into Nigeria, and arms traffickers from Libya and Chad were reportedly arrested in Nigeria in June (Punch, (<https://punchng.com/police-arrest-38-bandits-kidnappers-recover-24-ak-47-rifles/>) June 4). If Sudan spirals into conflict and arms proliferate, they may also end up arriving in ISWAP’s hands via the black market, making logistics routes through Niger and Chad all the more important for the group.

ISWAP may also recognize that Niger is increasingly becoming a sought after country by both French and U.S. forces as a base for operations targeting ISWAP in Nigeria and Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS)—whose attacks are now being claimed by ISWAP—and al-Qaeda-aligned jihadists in Mali. Therefore, ISWAP seeks to weaken, demoralize, or neutralize Niger (The Nation, (<https://www.thenation.com/article/syria-iraq-pentagon-overseas-military-bases/>) January 9).

More broadly, the attacks in Niger also reflect ISWAP's embedded position in the country. It was only in 2012 that signs of JAS/Boko Haram commencing operations in Niger surfaced, but in 2015 attacks there and in Chad became consistent (Terrorism Monitor, (<https://jamestown.org/program/boko-harams-growing-presence-in-niger/>) November 2, 2012). Both countries, but especially Niger, are now subject to constant ISWAP attacks. This demonstrates the overall growth and consolidation of ISWAP's insurgency and signifies the low likelihood of an end to the conflict soon either in Nigeria or Niger.

Meanwhile, the seeming inconsistencies in ISWAP targeting and claims in Niger and Chad and reports of factional clashes could suggest the increased tempo in attacks outside of Nigeria relates to leadership shifts. Could IS be advising Ba Idrisa to expand deeper into Niger and Chad for strategic purposes? Or could jihadists disaffected by Ba Idrisa and Abu Musab al-Barnawi be attempting to revive Shekau's influence in northern Borno and Niger? Shekau, for his part, in June released his first video since November 2018 clarifying his ideology, which has remained consistent since he first became leader in 2010. This could nonetheless be seen as a way of affirming his credentials to ISWAP defectors back to JAS/Boko Haram or to onlookers in IS, who saw Abu Musab al-Barnawi as too soft and find that Ba Idrisa lacks the popularity and defiance of Shekau (Twitter.com/a_salkida, (https://twitter.com/A_Salkida/status/1135664603311038465) June 3). Considering IS has still not formally announced Ba Idrisa as ISWAP leader, it could be biding its time to see how to manage these three claimants to that title, with ISWAP's shura having settled on Ba Idrisa but Abu Musab al-Barnawi and Shekau retaining their own bases of support both in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region and among IS' own leaders.

One thing is for sure: the factional dynamics in jihadism in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region will continue to shift, while the violence expands, deepens, and becomes more intractable.

Notes:

[1] The surname "al-Barnawi" means "from Borno," referring to the northeastern-most state in Nigeria.

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Article on the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) (leadership; attack trends; other topics)



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