



Boko Haram Stands at a Crossroads: Is the Era of Shekau Over ?

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Since May 21st, 2021, all eyes have been focused on the elimination of Boko Haram's leader Abu Baku Shekau. History shows us, that since 2009, Shekau has been allegedly killed four times on the battlefield. The last time, by the way, in 2016, he was only 'fatally wounded'. Each time, following his death announcement, like a phoenix in a well-prepared video, he reappears completely alive and well. In his speeches, he seems very comfortable, in full control and confidence, he speaks in the native Hausa language, spiced with verses from the Koran, in Arabic. Overall, he insists that he is alive and 'only by the will of God he will die' ([...] should know that he could not die except by the will of Allah [...]).¹

Shekau is wanted by the United States (a bounty of \$7 million was placed on his head).²

According to ISWAP (Islamic State of West Africa Province)³, Abu Bakar Shekau, Boko Haram's leader, has barricaded himself with some of his followers and dozens of fighters in the thick forest of Sambisa. His hiding place was attacked by more than 30 armored vehicles carrying heavy weapons assisted by dozens of ISWAP fighters mounted on motorcycles. The attackers forced his fighters and bodyguards to surrender. According to their reports, Shekau chose to blow himself up rather than

¹ About Shekau who died and was resurrected several times see the link:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-37476453>

² On June 21, 2012, the U.S. Department of State designated Shekau a Specially Designated Global Terrorist under Executive Order 13224.

https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/abubakar_shekau.html

³ ISWAP: A branch that split from Boko Haram in 2016 amid ongoing harm to innocent Muslim citizens and the exploitation of innocent boys and girls as suicide bombers. The branch swore allegiance in March 2015 to the Islamic State Caliphate. Mamman Nur headed the branch until he was killed on September 14, 2018. The branch is currently headed by Abu-Musad Albarnawy, known as Habib Yusuf. ISWAP leader Abu Musab is the son of Mohammed Yusuf, the founder and charismatic leader of Boko Haram, who was captured and assassinated by the Nigerian police on July 30, 2009.

be captured. He was wearing an explosive vest, like the explosive device carried by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi who was killed on October 26, 2019.⁴

Nigerian Army spokesman Brigadier General Muhammad Yerima responded to the rumors about Shekau's death and said that the issue was being investigated and insisted that these were just rumors. Similarly, senior Nigerian military officials have refrained from commenting on the Shekau killing other than statements such as: 'The issue is under investigation'; 'This is a Nigerian internal matter'.⁵

On the other hand, leaders from the Islamic State issued a statement on May 22nd, 2021 in Maiduguri (the capital of the state of Borno in northeastern Nigeria), following the Shekau elimination (qualified by them as a 'tumor')⁶, stating that: "Abu Musab al-Barnawi takes command of Boko Haram and all the territory that was in his prominence. This is a revenge on the head of the organization who was brutal and did not hesitate to harm and murder innocent people, good Muslims,⁷ also, it's a revenge for the assassination of his chief of staff Abu-Fatima."⁸

⁴ An alternate version - there is another version claiming that when he (Shekau) was surrounded by his opponents and required to surrender and swear allegiance to al-Barnawi, Shekau pulled out a gun and fired at his chest.

⁵ See the Reuters report: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigerias-military-investigates-reports-boko-haram-leaders-death-2021-05-21/>

⁶ On 2 August 2016, ISIS, in its propaganda magazine, Al-Naba, named Abu Musab al-Barnawi as the new Wali or leader of ISWAP. Abubakar Shekau denied he had been replaced and vowed to continue the insurgency as he did before.

⁷ He was brutal in the way he retained control over his foot soldiers as well as with the local population, many became displeased with his style, he killed Christians and Muslim as well.

⁸ Njadvara Musa, "Albarnawy replaces Shekau as ISWAP / Boko Haram leader," The Guardian (23.5.2021) .

<https://guardian.ng/news/albarnawy-replaces-shekau-as-iswap-boko-haram-leader/>

In addition to the reports on Shekau's death, the ISIS branch in West Africa presented a list of 30 of Shekau's officers and close staff who were captured. The list includes district commanders as well as many direct assistants.⁹ The capture of Districts-province heads and high-ranking commanders from the organization is a significant achievement (both military and intelligence) considering the military presence and activity of the Nigerian army in the region together with the MNJTF (The Multinational Joint Task Force).

After the killing of Shekau, questions such as whether Shekau is alive or dead, or if these two organizations that fought each other are irrelevant (and if so, what does it matter if Shekau is alive or dead)? The real question to be asked at this time is what's next? – What is important is to analyze and determine what are the immediate influences on the war against radical Islam in northeastern Nigeria and around the Lake Chad area. The citizens of these areas have been directly affected by this war for more than 11 years.

The balance of power between Boko Haram and ISWAP on the ground, tells us a different story than the conventional assumptions.

Boko Haram has ceased to be the leading organization. The 'senior' organization that controls Nigerian territory,¹⁰ via its control of the thick jungle of Alagarno and cooperates outside of Nigeria's borders with other radical Islamic organizations, under the ISIS banner, is the ISWAP affiliate. The ISWAP branch has more activists and more resources than Boko Haram. It is estimated to be 5,000

⁹ For a list of the 30 detainees as published by ISWAP, see Appendix A.

¹⁰ ISWAP controls extensive areas in the state of Borno such as: Konduga, Bama, Gwoza, Askira Uba, Hawul, Kaga, Biu.

As well as Madagali in the state of Adamawa.

In the state of Yobe in the cities of Gujiba, Buni Yadi, and Goniri.

fighters strong.¹¹ Boko Haram occupies several hiding places in the Sambisa Forest (60,000 square kilometers) around the area known as the 'Timbuktu Triangle'¹² and is active around the Lake Chad. They are estimated to have between 1,200 -1,500 fighters, most of them young people (kidnapped from towns and villages in the north east and have undergone brainwashing). It can be estimated that it will be easy to integrate them into ISWAP - the ISIS' Africa branch.¹³

Recognizing its supremacy over Boko Haram, ISWAP slowly penetrated the traditional strongholds of Boko Haram, sabotaged or expelled its fighters from their hiding places, and took control of the area. At the same time, ISWAP focused on hitting military convoys in traffic arteries and army camps in cities such as Maiduguri and Konduga. Focusing the fight against those in uniform, may lead to the insight that civilians in the region will not suffer any further from suicide bombings, abductions or raids on their villages.

¹¹ *Crisis Group's report number 273* dated 16.5.2019.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/273-facing-challenge-islamic-state-west-africa-province>.

¹² The 'Timbuktu Triangle' (not to be confused with Timbuktu in Mali) is considered an impenetrable stronghold for the Nigerian army. The triangle includes Buk, Gorgi Talala. For four years the Nigerian army tried to occupy the Boko Haram stronghold in this triangle and failed. In a combined attack on February 3, 2021 the army (Sector 2 Forces, Nigerian Air Force with the help of special forces) managed to liberate several towns in the area. See:

<https://prnigeria.com/2021/02/03/nigerian-troops-timbuktu-triangle/>;

On the division of the territory into sectors and the force composition in it, see David Doukhan's article dated 28.12.2020 - Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram: Reflections

http://www.ict.org.il/Article/2640/Multinational_Joint_Task_Force_against_Boko_Haram_Reflections#gsc.tab=0

¹³ On the rivalry between Boko Haram and the ISWAP affiliate, it is recommended to read the summary of Tomás Husted to the members of the US Congress from March 26, 211 at the link:

<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10173.pdf>.

Albeit an unworthy prediction, one can assume that the use of children for suicide bombings will decrease or disappear, as this was one of the reasons for the split in 2016 within Boko Haram.

ISWAP, as the biggest and strongest radical Islamic organization in the region, is expected to intensify its attacks on military bases and garrisons. As for the local farmers and shepherds, they will continue to supply means of subsistence, voluntarily or involuntarily. Collaborators with the authorities will be pursued and executed. ISWAP will continue to collect taxes from the fishermen in Lake Chad and transit fees for goods that pass through the roads they control - all based on the pretext that they are protecting them. ISWAP needs to fill in the gaps in weapons. The organization's control of the Sambisa Forest, the Alagarno Forest and Lake Chad allows it to control the main highway to Maiduguri, the capital of the state of Borno.

In summary, eliminating an organization's leader does not necessarily lowers the curtain on the organization. As noted, with Boko Haram's leader, who returned from the dead several times, the undersigned proposes to wait before celebrating his death.

In Nigeria, it is difficult to distinguish 'the real facts, especially when it comes to the north east which is an undeveloped area with poor means of communication. Additionally, if Shekau blew himself up, the undersigned can't believe his remains will be found.

The writer would not be surprised if Shekau's death remained a mystery forever, assuming he did indeed die.

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30.5.2021

Appendix A - List of District Commanders and Senior Officials of the Boko Haram Organization Captured by ISWAP

<https://allafrica.com/stories/202105210156.html> (source)

Abdul Bash, Commander Parisu

Abu Mujaheed, Commander of Sabil Huda

Mala Ali, Commander of Farisu

Amir Hassana, Commander Garin Dambe

Malam Bako, Commander Hizba

Amir Halid, Commander Njimiya Falluja, Commander Garin Mala

Abu- Fatima, Commander, Gwashke

Kaka BK, Commander Garin Abu Asmau.

Alai Bukar, Commander Mina Ngawri

Abu-Ubaida, Commander Jungle Gabra in Pulka

Amir Abdulrahman, Commander, Gobara

Abu Muhammad, Commander Alava

Ali Shara, Commander Yuwe Hanyan Bama

Amir Huzayfa, Commander Yuwe Hanyan Welcome

Abubakar Sarki, Commander Yuwe Hanyan Konduga

Ibn Abbas, Commander Barin Bulla Yaga

Ali Ngule, Commander Madara Mountain

Ummati Mai Shayi, Commander Madara Mountain

Mala Musa Abuja, the Chief Bomb Maker

Mallam Bana Sharra, Chief Judge to Shekau faction, located at Garin Mala Hassan

Baba Dr. Konduga, Chief Medical Doctor

Alava Road, Ma'azu Dan Lokodisa, the Chief Prison Officer

Alai Abba, the Caretaker of Women, children

Mala Musa, Chief Mechanic Officer, located at Parisu

Abu Zaid, Chief Bombmaker, located at Parisu

Abu Aisha Special Clearance operations Unit, Fairs

Amir Okasha, Bomb Timer,

Farisu and Amir Awana.

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