Factional Split Inside Boko Haram

Evolving Dynamics and Future Implications

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In the early 2000s, a young imam in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State in Nigeria, rose to prominence. Muhamed Yusuf, a Salafist scholar, preached Nigerians to return to true Islam and refute "bid'a" (novelties) of Western civilization. He protested the spread of "Western" education, democracy and the corruption of the governing elite. His message resonated with local communities in the Northeast, having suffered from prolonged political and socio-economic marginalization.

In 2009, a confrontation between Yusuf's followers and the security forces erupted, leading Yusuf to call for the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate by force. He was arrested and killed while in police custody. Consequently, his followers went into hiding in the Sambisa Forest and his lieutenants, most notably Abu-Bakr Sehaku, Khalid Al-Barnawi, Kaka Allai, Mustapha Chad, Abu Maryam, and Mamman Nur began competing for leadership of the group..

The competition narrowed down to two of Yusuf's closest followers: Mamman Nur and Abu-Bakr Shekau, ending with the latter's victory. A charismatic, ambitious and ruthless leader, Shekau envisioned regrouping Yusuf's followers and institutionalizing the group into an insurgent organization[1]. The Jamatu Ahli Al-Sunna lil Da'wa Wal Jihad (JAS) shortly emerged, and quickly became the deadliest terrorist group in the world[2]. Between 2010 and 2015, JAS focused its attacks on secular schools, government premises, international institutions and churches, while rarely targeting Muslim civilians.

Causes and Implications of the Split

In 2011-2012, a group from the JAS Shura Council (a consultative council), led by Khalid Al-Barnawi and Mamman Nur, sent letters to the leaders of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), criticizing Shekau's leadership and extremist stances[3]. The differences between Shekau and his commanders rapidly grew, leading to the first schism in JAS and the emergence of "Jama'at Ansari Al-Muslimin fi Bilad Al-Sudan" (Ansaru). AQIM distanced itself from JAS and limited its communication and support in Nigeria to Ansaru. Lacking support from a jihadi "Big Brother" and suffering from the repercussions of successive territorial losses, Shekau found it necessary to reorient the group towards Al-Qaida's arch rival, the Islamic State (IS).

Reunited with Ansaru leaders, Abu-Bakr Shekau pledged allegiance to IS Caliph Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi in March 2015. IS accepted the pledge of allegiance and named Shekau the "Waly" (leader) of the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). Aware of Shekau's history with AQIM, Al-Baghdadi had several doubts regarding his leadership and his ideological commitments[4]; ones that were later confirmed when

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[1] Atta Barkindo, "Abubakr Shekau: Boko Haram's Underestimated Corporatist-Strategic Leader" in Zenn, Jacob (2018). Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. United States Military Academy. Accessed at: https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf

[2] The Institute for Economics and Peace (2017). Global Terrorism Index 2016. Accessed at: http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2016.2.pdf

[3] Al-Andalus media production (2016). Nasaeh wa Tawjihat men Al-Shaykh Abu Al-Hassan Rashid li Mujahidi Nigeria.

[4] Mahmoud & Ani (2018). Factional Dynamics within Boko Haram. Institute for Security Studies. See also: Kassim, Abdulbasit, "Boko Haram Internal Civil War: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism" in Zenn, Jacob (2018). Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. United States Military Academy.

Baghdadi received letters of complaint from Shekau's subordinates, namely Muhamed Yusuf's son and former Boko Haram spokesman, Abu Musab Al-Barnawi, and Mamman Nur. They contested three main aspects of Shekau's leadership (detailed below): his despotic character, his ideological extremism or "Guluw", and his poor operational skills.

- First: Shekau was accused of neglecting the group's Shura Council and taking major decisions on his own. Repeatedly, group members who expressed opposition to Shekau's decisions were liquidated in mysterious conditions. His followers, on the other hand, were killed for committing trivial mistakes. In addition, Barnawi and Nur accused Shekau of hording the group's gains and resources, failing to fairly distribute revenues to its members--citing the dire living conditions of foot soldiers[5].
- Second: Barnawi and Nur criticized Shekau's extremist stances on key ideological issues, especially "Takfir" (ex-communication). According to Shekau, any person -- Muslim or non-Muslim -- who refuses to join JAS and to live under its rulings and inside its territories is a "Kafir" (apostate), thus making it permissible to attack Muslim communities that live in government controlled areas, own ID cards or passports, and educate their children in secular schools. However, this is firmly contested in Al-Qaida doctrine, which Ansaru leaders (Barnawi and Nur) originally follow.
- Third: Due to successive tactical failures, Boko Haram witnessed a major military setback by the end of 2015 and the group lost all of the territory it had previously gained. Seeking refuge in the forest, it resorted to suicide bombings, targeting mainly security checkpoints and local markets[6]. Shekau exploited abducted women and children to carry out these attacks. According to UNICEF, between 2014 and 2016, nearly 20% of Boko Haram's suicide bombers were children, three quarters of whom were girls.[7] In contrast, IS deployed suicide bombings less frequently and only male fighters were expected to carry out such attacks.

In August 2016, Al-Baghdadi declared Abu-Musab Al-Barnawi as the Waly of ISWAP, removing Shekau from his position. This decision led to the split of the group into two factions: Abu-Bakr Shekau's group, which returned to its old name "JAS"; and Barnawi and Nur's group as "ISWAP".

Ideological and strategic differences between the two factions were directly translated into each group's modus operandi. The loss of a significant number of adherent fighters led JAS to increase its suicide attacks on civilian gatherings. It routinely engaged in indiscriminate killings, raiding whole villages and abducting women and children. In contrast, ISWAP led more sophisticated, organized and large-scale attacks on military camps and oil exploration sites.[8]

Differences manifested themselves in the way each faction handled the abduction of school girls: In Dapchi, 110 girls abducted by ISWAP were reportedly well-treated and well-fed. They were released

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[5] Ibid.
[6] Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (September 2018). Global Extremism Monitor: Violent Islamist Extremism in 2017. Accessed at:
https://institute.global/sites/default/files/inlinefiles/Global%20Extremism%20Monitor%202017.pdf
[7] UNICEF (April 2016). Bring Back our Childhood. Accessed at:
http://files.unicef.org/media/files/Beyond_Chibok.pdf
[8] The Telegraph, "Boko Haram Attack on Nigeria Oil Team 'Killed More than 50", 28 July 2017. Accessed at:
www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/07/28/boko-haram-attack-nigeria-oil-team-killed-50/.

following a short period, except for one Christian girl who refused to adhere to Islam. In contrast, JAS abducted 276 Chibok girls in 2014 and to date, more than 100 are thought to remain in captivity. The girls who managed to escape the group's camps recall the horrific accounts of systematic mistreatment, torture and sexual abuse.

Local Perception of Boko Haram's Two factions

Through a series of interviews and discussions with local community leaders living in the northeastern parts of Nigeria, one author found wide agreement between respondents that JAS is a brutal criminal and immoral group, while ISWAP is a more rational organization.

According to a local imam living in Yobe State, the interactions of ISWAP fighters with the local community are more subtle. However, "the local community isn't fooled by that, because even if they pretend to avoid civilian targets, it's practically impossible to totally escape collateral damage"[9]. Another respondent from Maiduguri indicated that it's inaccurate to proclaim that ISWAP totally refrains from targeting civilians, citing the example of the Magumeri attack. In July 2017, ISWAP attacked an oil exploration team in the area of Magumeri in Borno State; the respondent's friend is one of the few survivors of the attack that killed 50 civilians. Additionally, ISWAP has widely depended on extortion and taxation as a means for financial survival, murdering (in some instances) local civilians who refused to pay "protection money"[10].

On the other hand, respondents agreed that enrooted grievances that motivate vulnerable individuals to join terrorist organizations still persist in their communities. Therefore, if ISWAP continues to present itself as the group that revolts against state corruption, while offering financial incentives, it will have a greater chance,in comparison to JAS, of recruiting supporters.

Conclusion

Following the split inside Boko Haram, several argue that ISWAP is more apt to present a long term threat to the Lake Chad Basin.[11] However, the group's attacks resulting in civilian injuries and deaths has diminished its popular support. Through a decade-long experience with terrorism, local communities have concluded that terrorist groups may differ in short term tactics, however, in the long term they all seek destabilization of the community and exacerbation of the conflict.

Although each group follows different operational strategies and is affiliated to two opposing jihadi groups, the distinction between ISWAP and JAS isn't clear-cut. Recent developments inside ISWAP, especially the killing of Mamman Nur by his own combatants, leave little doubt about the group's tendency towards more extreme positions. An internal schism inside ISWAP might be expected, resulting in a reunification of Boko Haram's two factions, especially in the aftermath of the fall of IS and the need for reuniting efforts and resources.

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[9] Author anonymous interviews, individuals from Northeast Nigeria, Cairo, 2 August 2018.
[10] Mahmoud & Ani (2018). Factional Dynamics within Boko Haram. Institute for Security Studies. Accessed at: https://issafrica.org/research/books-and-other-publications/factional-dynamics-within-boko-haram
[11] Congressional Research Service (June 2018). Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province. Accessed at: https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10173.pdf See also Mahmoud & Ani (2018). Factional Dynamics within Boko Haram. Institute for Security Studies. Accessed at: https://issafrica.org/research/books-and-other-publications/factional-dynamics-within-boko-haram

Local authorities need to acknowledge the real scope of the terrorist threat. Repeated declarations of the successful defeat of Boko haram[12] won't contribute to facing the actual challenge. Security forces should boost their field preparedness in anticipation of a strong comeback of Boko Haram following the potential reunification of JAS and ISWAP. There is also an urgent need for regional governments to strengthen coordination, information sharing and enhance border control in order to disrupt transnational channels of support between various terrorist actors in the region[13]. Finally, international stakeholders should take into consideration the rapid developments of internal dynamics shaping the terrorist landscape, not only in Nigeria but in the whole Sahel and Lake Chad Basin regions, when formulating their counter-terrorism (CT), countering or preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) interventions in the region.

It is equally important to acknowledge that security measures alone are never sufficient enough to contain a terrorist threat. It is crucial to further empower local communities in order to build their resilience and disrupt all terrorist recruitment efforts. While Nigeria is currently drafting its national PVE strategy, it is indispensable to include local communities at all stages of the process. The Kenyan experience in drafting county-specific PVE action plans stand as a good example of national efforts that take into consideration the variabilities of drivers to radicalization and extremism as relevant to each region.

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[12] John Alechenu, "We've decimated Boko Haram, FG insists", October 31, 2018, Punch. Accessed at: https://punchng.com/weve-decimated-boko-haram-fg-insists/
[13] Ryan Cummings, "Al-Qaeda's Nigerian Chapter", 29 March 2017, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. Accessed at: https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/al-qaedas-nigerian-chapter