

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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PHILIPPINES: MNLF HARDENS STANCE TOWARD ABU SAYYAF

Alexander Sehmer

Four members of the Southeast Asian militant group Abu Sayyaf were killed in the southern Philippines during a confrontation with members of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) on August 9. While the MNLF has worked with the military in the past on such operations, the recent clash appears not to have been coordinated with the authorities, although an army spokesman all but welcomed the news ([The Philippine Star](#), August 10).

According to MNLF, those killed included mid-level Abu Sayyaf commander Jennor Lahab, sometimes known as Jim Dragon, and his son ([Manila Times](#), August 11). The two were from an Abu Sayyaf faction led by Alhabsy Misaya, whose group is behind a series of kidnappings carried out in collaboration with criminal gangs, including one that ended in the brutal beheading of a Malaysian engineer ([Asia Times](#), November 17, 2015; [The Star](#) [Malaysia], December 1, 2015). Lahab himself is suspected of involvement in the kidnapping of 10 In

donesian sailors, who were freed in May on payment of a ransom ([The Philippine Star](#), May 1).

It is in this context that the clash seems to have occurred. The MNLF generally opposes Abu Sayyaf (which split from the group in the 1990s), and its chairman, Nur Misuari, vowed several years ago to prevent the group from using Sulu as a base for its kidnapping operations. The recent beheading of Canadian hostages John Ridsdel and Robert Hall by an Abu Sayyaf faction linked to Islamic State brought unwelcome international attention to the situation in the southern Philippines and appears to have reaffirmed the MNLF's resolve to stamp out the kidnapping operation ([The Philippine Star](#), April 27; [The Philippine Star](#), June 21).

The clash is also likely a response to recent calls from President Rodrigo Duterte – the Philippine's first president to hail from Mindanao, and himself an advocate of violent reprisals on criminals – for the MNLF (and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front) to explicitly reject Abu Sayyaf. Duterte himself has demonstrated a somewhat mixed attitude towards Abu Sayyaf in the past, but has come out strongly against IS.

At the same time, Duterte has taken steps to move forward on the stalled peace process in the southern

Philippines, approving a roadmap put forward by Jesus Dureza, the presidential adviser on the peace process, which envisages massive on-the-ground development projects to boost the local economy. The MNLF will be loath to jeopardize such an opportunity, and a further bloody response to Abu Sayyaf may well be the result.

PAKISTAN: RIVALS LAY CLAIM TO QUETTA HOSPITAL ATTACK

Alexander Sehmer

A suicide bomber blew himself up at Quetta's Civil Hospital in the capital of Pakistan's Balochistan province on August 8, killing more than 70 people and injuring about 100 others. Many of those killed were lawyers who had gathered to protest the earlier killing of Bilal Anwar Kasi, the president of the Balochistan Bar Association. Also among the dead were journalists reporting on the lawyers' protest.

Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a breakaway faction of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), claimed responsibility for the bombing, as well as for Kasi's murder, but a few hours later Islamic State (IS) also stepped in to claim the bombing ([First Post](#), August 9). Meanwhile, Balochistan's Chief Minister Sardar Sanaulah Zehri told local reports that India's intelligence service was behind the attack ([Dawn](#), August 9).

Islamic State probably has the capacity to carry out such an attack through a Pakistani affiliate, and the rival claims cannot be verified. However, the more established Jamaat-ul-Ahrar – which briefly aligned itself with IS in 2014 before switching back to the TTP – has experience carrying out high-casualty attacks in Pakistan. It has masterminded several devastating blasts, including one at a crowded Easter celebration at a park in Lahore in which 72 people were killed ([Express Tribune](#), March 27).

Some commentators have suggested the loss of so many legal experts in the Quetta attack could have serious repercussions at a local level, but why the group should specifically target lawyers is open to speculation. Professional groups have come under attack from Jamaat-ul-Ahrar in the past, notably health workers treating polio, who are sometimes portrayed by militants as part of a Western conspiracy to sterilize Muslims ([Dawn](#), April 21, [Dawn](#), March 18, 2015). Possibly as a professional group lawyers are an obvious symbol of constitutional authority. The lawyers certainly feel they are under fire, boycotting the courts during a period of mourning in the aftermath of the attack and demanding greater protection ([Dunya News](#), August 16).

However, the group's most frequent targets are the security forces and members of minority communities, a reflection of the sectarian hatreds harbored by many of the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi commanders who make up its ranks (See [Terrorism Monitor](#), July 22). Most likely, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar was focused more on the location – the bomb went off in a hospital, the kind of soft target the group favors – than on the profession of the blast victims.

Al-Shabaab Aims for 'Hearts and Minds' With Establishment of Islamic Police Force

Sunguta West

Al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Somalia, claims to have established a religious police force in an area it controls in southern Somalia, seeking to push forward its Islamist agenda even as it struggles to hold on to its territory in the face of the advance of African Union (AU) troops.

Al-Shabaab has lost a great deal of territory to the Somali National Government forces and the troops of the AU mission in Somalia (AMISOM) over the years, but it continues to control parts of southern Somalia (Horseed Media, May 6).

While some analysts suggest that contradictory policies and AMISOM's own inefficiencies have sustained the conflict and even bolstered al-Shabaab, the group has nonetheless suffered heavy losses at the hands of better-armed AMISOM troops and struggled with internal differences (Herald, May 17). The establishment of the new (so-called) Islamic police, or Hisba, is yet another indication that the group is far from defeat.

Islamic 'Police Force'

The Hisba officers were first sighted in Jilib, the most populous town in Somalia's Middle Juba region and currently the group's political and military headquarters, on August 9. Photographs released by the group through its mouthpiece Radio Andalus showed men in uniform with ID cards and branded vehicles on patrol in the city (Hiraan Online, August 9).

From Jilib, al-Shabaab hopes to deploy the force across the areas it controls, including Juba, Gedo, Lower Shabelle, Middle Shabelle, Bay and Bakool, Hiraan, and Galgudud in southern Somalia.

News of the Hisba's establishment followed the release on July 12 of the first audio message – entitled "Sharia or Martyrdom" – from Sheikh Ahmad Umar Abu Ubaidah, the leader or emir of al-Shabaab (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), August 5).

That Umar felt compelled to release the message at all suggests morale among the militant group was low. Through his message Umar sought to inspire his forces. While the audio recording was aimed at the fighters, the message sent by the establishment of the Hisba force is clearly intended for the public in the regions al-Shabaab controls.

The establishment of the new force is intended to win the movement public support in those areas by highlighting its role in the dispensation of justice.

Seeking Public Support

According to the group, the force will be unarmed, but it will work as part of the commission for the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice and seek to “encourage” morality among Somali citizens.

The Hisba will carry out its work under the group’s strict interpretation of sharia. Its main task is providing moral guidance in line with Islamic teachings, and al-Shabaab has made clear the new force can be expected to arrest and even behead those engaging in the consumption and sale of alcohol. The group has also made clear the force will carry out harsh punishments including cutting-off men’s penises as a punishment for adultery, stoning to death promiscuous women, and amputating the hands of those caught stealing. Those wearing Western clothes regarded un-Islamic will also be detained. It will also protect the quality of food, medicine, and clothing in the market (Zipo, August 10).

This is reminiscent of group’s early activities from 2006-2009, when it stormed through central and southern Somalia and implemented a strict form of sharia, cutting-off limbs, stoning women to death, and caning others who broke its religious laws (Standard, September 27, 2014). In those days, the group even carried out double amputations – cutting-off the arms and legs of people suspected of stealing people’s property in Southern Somalia (Hiiran Online, June 22, 2009). This harsh dispensation of justice reduced crime with brutal efficiency, but this came at a huge cost to personal and social freedoms (SomaliaReport , January 24, 2012; Somalia Report, December 4, 2011).

Jilib as a Strategic Stronghold

In many ways, the Hisba is not a new phenomenon; the militants themselves have carried out such duties in the past (Tuko, August 9). In regions where the government has no administrative control (such as Jilib), al-Shabaab continues to conduct its sharia courts, run schools, manage a taxation system, and install its own governors (Zipo, August 10).

Jilib became al-Shabaab’s de-facto base in 2015, after the group was forced out of Bardheere, its operation and logistical headquarters, and Dinsoor, its political center, by AMISOM troops (Tuko, July 24, 2015; Horseed Media, July 24, 2015).

Jilib, with its population of 45,000, is a commercial town located on the main road from Mogadishu’s south to the port city of Kismayu. Once the headquarters of Islamic Courts Union, the Islamist movement from which al-Shabaab splintered amid the Union’s defeat in 2006, Jilib’s location allows al-Shabaab to access the Indian Ocean through secret routes. Through these routes, it receives contraband, including arms, and new recruits.

Jilib is described as vast, flat agricultural zone that ensures access to food for the group, and it provides them with a tactical advantage. AMISON forces and their international partners recently increased aerial bombardment of the city with a view to weakening the movement (Intelligencebriefs, August 26, 2015). Hundreds of fighters are believed to have been killed in the attacks, which have been carried out mainly by the Kenya Defense Forces.

Potential for Local Appeal

With the announcement of its new police force in Jilib, al-Shabaab is seeking to strengthen its grip on the city, one of its few remaining strategic strongholds, by creating a force that can easily engage with the public, maybe even winning over public opinion and furthering public support for the group.

Judging by the group’s past success in combating crime, it is possible the new force will have some appeal at a local level.

Meanwhile, the heavy public promotion of the new Islamic police force will likely encourage further sustained attacks by AMISOM and its partners, who will be wondering at al-Shabaab's confidence in heralding the establishment of such a unit.

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Political Turmoil in KRG Risks Hinder Kurdish Efforts Against Islamic State

Göktuğ Sönmez

Kurdish Peshmerga forces in Iraq have been some of the most effective in tackling Islamic State (IS) on the ground, but the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) itself has been mired for more than a year in political turmoil over the extension of President Masoud Barzani's term [in office](#) ([Al-Monitor, May 22, 2015](#); [Anadolu Agency](#), April 13).

In May, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Gorran Movement, which broke away from the PUK in 2009, signed an agreement opposing what they view as Barzani's one-man rule ([Ekurd Daily](#), May 17). The document, which consists of 25 articles, emphasizes the importance of liberal democratic values and strongly criticizes the lack of such values in the KRG.

At the same time, the KRG faces a growing economic crisis, and while political compromise could end the parliamentary stalemate, only the defeat of IS appears likely to end the Kurdish autonomous region's economic problems.

Barzani's Rule

Masoud Barzani, who leads the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), has been president of the KRG since 2005. His second term ended in 2013, but his rule was extended for a further two years by parliament. Under this legal amendment he should have stepped down on August 19, 2015. Instead he has ruled without a mandate for nearly a year.

From the outset, there was disagreement over the move to extend Barzani's presidential term. Both the PUK and Gorran demanded Barzani's powers be reduced in favor of parliament. The KDP, on the other hand, wanted to call a presidential election, which they expected would see Barzani granted another term. The political debate spilled over into violence. Barzani dismissed ministers from Gorran and banned Yusuf Mohammed Sadiq, the speaker of the Kurdish parliament, from Erbil ([Ekurd Daily](#), October 12, 2015).

These moves appear to have brought the PUK and Gorran closer together. It had been thought that the PUK could soften its stance towards Barzani in the hope of eliminating Gorran, and regain its position as the main political partner of the KDP. The PUK-Gorran deal in May, then, came as a surprise to many but indicates the two parties believe that united they may be able to remove Barzani from office and share power between themselves.

Economic Crisis

Amid the political turmoil, the KRG is also suffering on the economic front, hit both by the declining oil price and the financial burden of the fight against IS. Numerous construction and development projects have been halted and the government is struggling to pay the monthly salaries of teachers, doctors, and even MPs and the Peshmerga. Considering the Peshmerga is about 100,000-strong, the payment that needs to be made to them alone could constitute up to \$300 million ([Reuters](#), December 04, 2015).

Around 6,000 construction projects have been halted in the region and electricity provision has slipped to around eight hours a day, a disappointing figure by any yardstick, but especially compared to earlier provision of 22 hours ([Ekurd Daily](#), January 01).

While the decline in the oil price has had a significant impact, the KRG already had a budget deficit of about \$6.5 billion due to the Baghdad government's decision to stop transferring the KRG's previously agreed share of state revenues, which constitutes 17 percent of Iraq's overall state budget ([Rudaw](#), December 16, 2015; [Al Jazeera Turk](#), June 08, 2015).

The KRG also bears some responsibility for its current economic problems, mainly because of its failure to channel revenues from energy sales in earlier years into R&D and profitable industrial projects. It is also argued that behind the economic crisis lie corruption, nepotism, and a lack of accountability that complicates deals and negatively impacts politics ([Reuters](#), December 04, 2015). As a consequence, many qualified educated people, including teachers and doctors in the region, are looking to leave – some travelling without the required documents – to neighboring countries and fur-

ther afield to Europe, in order to find better opportunities there.

Disputed Territories

More broadly, the Peshmerga's efforts to recapture areas taken by IS, have complicated Iraq's political situation.

When IS began its campaign in 2014 and took control of Mosul, Baiji and Tikrit, Tal Afar, Anbar and advanced into Kirkuk and Diyala, capturing hydrocarbon resources and military equipment, they became in effect the neighbors of the KRG. When IS advanced towards Erbil – a move that was marked by the first U.S. air strike against the group – it became clear the KRG would need to fight back.

The Kurd's successful campaign has allowed the KRG to expand its influence in almost all the areas it disputes with the central government. This came about in part because of the Iraqi army's earlier failure in the face of IS, although it has not been without cost to the Kurds, who saw at least 1,500 Peshmerga fighters killed and about 8,000 injured over a six-month period ([Rudaw](#), November 1, 2015; [Iraqi News](#), November 4, 2015).

The Peshmerga are now in de facto control of Kirkuk. This occurred as a result of their presence on the ground and the influence of Governor Najmaddin Kerim, a leading PUK figure who has used his position to extend Kurdish security forces' control over the city and its energy resources.

The settlements of Tuzkhurmatu and Tazekhurmatu are a further point of tension, in this case between Kurds and Turkmen. Given that a significant amount of the Turkmen forces in these areas fight under the aegis of the Hashd-al Shaabi, an umbrella organization for Shia militia groups that has official links to the Iraqi prime minister, these conflicts could escalate further.

The Kurds have been able to take the upper hand in Kirkuk and have gone largely unchallenged, except in Arab-populated Havija. The Peshmerga's capture of Shingal from IS was welcomed internationally and provided an important boost to Kurdish morale, indeed the Kurdish military gains have led KRG officials to increasingly talk about a three-state solution for a post-IS Iraq.

However, the fighting has also exposed the KRG's internal political struggles and quarrels over the control of territory and natural resources have underlined the rift between the KDP and PUK. Their treatment of other ethnic groups within these territories is also under scrutiny.

Political Tensions

While the KDP, Gorran and PUK all share the position that the disputed territories belong to the KRG, attempts to officially link them to the Kurd's autonomous region have the potential to further deteriorate already tense relations between Erbil and Baghdad.

The Turkmen presence in the region means Turkey also claims an interest, further complicating the situation. The potential for tension to spill over into regional conflict means the Iranians and the United States are also closely monitoring events.

In the light of all these factors, President Barzani's frequently repeated calls for independence seem unlikely to be realized any time soon. In fact, the call for independence is viewed by most Kurds as merely a political rallying cry as the current state of the KRG's politics have left it in no shape to pursue it.

Whether the May 2016 deal between the PUK and Gorran signals the end of the KDP rule in the near future remains to be seen. It does present a challenge to the KDP. If Gorran and the PUK can consolidate their deal, their political power combined could herald defeat for the KDP. That may push the KDP towards compromise. But the KDP has resorted to repression in the past, notably during a period of tension with Gorran in 2015, and could do so again. Gorran is particularly susceptible to the threat of force since, unlike the other two parties, it does not maintain its own Peshmerga.

With IS undefeated, the consequences of KRG internal tensions erupting into conflict could be severe. That should ensure the KDP favors compromise, but a real end to the crisis will only come with the defeat of IS and the re-capturing of the oil-rich regions that are under IS control, most of which are within the PUK sphere of influence. Free from any dispute with the central government, the revenues from these could end the KRG's economic crisis.

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Boko Haram: Abu Musab al-Barnawi's Leadership Coup and Offensive in Niger

Jacob Zenn

On August 3, Islamic State (IS) announced that Habib Yusuf (a.k.a. Abu Musab al-Barnawi), the son of Boko Haram founder Muhammed Yusuf, was the new *wali* (governor) of its "West Africa Province," the name IS gave to Boko Haram after Abubakar Shekau pledged loyalty to Abubakar al-Baghdadi in March 2015.

Al-Barnawi is the first Boko Haram factional leader to successfully depose Shekau, who has led the group since Yusuf's death in 2010 and thwarted a number of rivals in that time (Terrorism Monitor, September 22, 2011). Al-Barnawi, like others before him, accuses Shekau of excessively killing Muslim civilians and may have been aided in his "coup" by outside support and validation from IS, which depends on al-Barnawi because he – not Shekau – controls the lines of communication to IS.

Shekau, meanwhile, claims that al-Barnawi's faction manipulated IS by preventing Shekau from sending complaints to Abubakar al-Baghdadi about al-Barnawi using "personal opinion" (rather than God's directives) in deciding who to avoid killing.

In an August 7 video, where Shekau showed his face for the first time since his March 2015 pledge to al-Baghdadi, and again in the recent August 15 video of the captive Chibok schoolgirls, Shekau and Shekau's spokesman and military amir confirmed that Shekau has reverted to being the leader of Jamatu Ahlis Sunna Lida'awatti wal Jihad (JAS) – Boko Haram's original name – and is no longer part of West Africa Province (Vanguard, August 7; Vanguard, August 15)). Thus, al-Barnawi is now the leader of West Africa Province, and Shekau is the leader of JAS, though both groups are commonly still referred to as "Boko Haram."

In the long-term al-Barnawi will likely refresh alliances, including, paradoxically, to al-Qaeda. But in the short-term, his influence has been evident on the battlefield, particularly with West Africa Province's offensive in Niger.

This article reviews the history of JAS and what is now West Africa Province in Niger, including the recent offensive and corresponding IS media blitz that promoted it. It discusses why al-Barnawi's faction was likely behind the offensive and examines the nature of al-Barnawi's faction in comparison to Shekau's, concluding that, in the long-term, al-Barnawi's alliances, targets, and areas of operation are likely to be more closely aligned to al-Qaeda than IS.

Initial Attacks in Niger

Although there were Nigeriens among the early followers of JAS, even prior to Shekau's assumption of leadership and declaration of "jihad" in 2010, the first publicized arrests of JAS militants in Niger came in 2012 (Terrorism Monitor, November 2, 2012).

Even then, JAS carried out no attacks in Niger until 2015. A breakaway group, Ansaru, the predecessor of al-Barnawi's faction, did take part in attacks led by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) on a French-run energy plants in Arlit and Agadez, and a prison break attempt in Niamey in 2013. JAS mainly used Niger mostly as a rear base for logistics, recruitment, and recovery after battles in Nigeria and did not want to risk provoking Niger into launching a large-scale crackdown on JAS networks in the country (Jeuneafrique, May 13, 2013).

Then, in February 2015, JAS sent a two-person team of suicide bombers – one male, one female, with the man reportedly dressed in a hijab – to the town of Diffa, where they blew themselves up in retaliation for Niger's participation in a regional military offensive against JAS (Jeuneafrique, February 11, 2015). The Diffa attack was promoted on the Twitter account called "Al-Urhwa Al-Wutqha" that JAS was using as a platform to advertise Shekau's then upcoming pledge to al-Baghdadi. Al-Urhwa Al-Wutqha was launched in coordination with IS' North Africa-based Africa Media, which was in contact with al-Barnawi (Twitter [account now suspended], February 13, 2015). Moreover, it also seems likely former Ansaru operatives masterminded JAS's female suicide bombing program, which deployed more than 200 women in female suicide bombings over a two-year period. These media and tactical connections, in addition

to Ansaru's pre-existing operations in Nigeria, strongly suggest al-Barnawi had a role in the attack.

Al-Barnawi's faction was also already a part of JAS at the time of the Diffa attack, forming (albeit only hesitantly) a "General Command" with Shekau's faction, as demanded by IS. IS had requested the two groups present a united front in order for JAS to be designated as its West Africa Province.

Following the Diffa attack until May 2016, Niger was rarely targeted, while attacks escalated in Cameroon and Chad. More recently, however, West Africa Province has scaled back attacks on Chad, possibly as a result of a tacit agreement with the country's leadership, and Cameroon too has seen fewer attacks, due to a large-scale counter-insurgency effort that has stymied West Africa Province in the country's north. The Niger offensive that began in May 2016, then, has got under way in the context of reduced attacks in Chad and Cameroon, and with an aggressive Nigerian military offensive bringing pressure to bear in the Boko Haram heartland of northeastern Nigeria.

Mounting the Campaign

The campaign in Niger began on May 19 in Yebi, near Bosso, where West Africa Province razed the town, killed several civilians, and left dozens of people injured. Nigerien forces expelled Boko Haram the following day, but many of the town's inhabitants had already fled. Following the operation in Yebi, West Africa Province carried out four more operations in Niger:

- On May 27, Nigerien forces repelled an attempt to attack Bosso in a battle lasting several hours.
- On May 31, around 40 militants again attacked Yebi in the evening, killing several civilians.
- On June 3, around 100 militants attacked Bosso, killing several dozen Nigerien and Nigerian soldiers, and taking several civilian hostages.
- On June 5, militants again attacked Bosso and neighboring villages, but did not inflict as much damage as the attack two days before (maghrebsahel (blog), July 6).

Coinciding with these attacks were various statements by IS on behalf of West Africa Province:

- On June 4, IS claimed West Africa Province killed 35 Nigerian and Nigerien soldiers and looted

arms in an attack on Bosso (referring to the June 3 attack).

- On June 7, IS released, via its Amaq News Agency, a one-minute video showing the June 3 Bosso attack.
- On June 14, IS' weekly al-Naba newsletter featured an interview of a "military source" claiming a "surprise attack" on the Chadian, Nigerien, and Nigerian armies, again referring to the Bosso attack.
- On June 17, IS claimed an attack on Nigerien forces in Diffa that allegedly killed "seven apostates."
- On June 19, IS' Amaq media agency released a short video of an attack in Diffa.
- On July 5, IS released a 14-minute video via Telegram of the June 3 attack in Bosso called "Invading Niger: Scenes from Liberating the Nigerien Apostate Army Camp in the Area of Bosso" (Twitter, July 6).
- In late July, IS released two infographics, one which called Niger an area of "medium control" for IS (along with Nigeria, Afghanistan, Libya and six other countries), and another which provided statistics on weapons looted from the June 3 Bosso attack.

Media Messaging Points to al-Barnawi

Al-Barnawi's hand in the attacks in Niger can be seen first and foremost in the way the operations were promoted in IS media. Al-Barnawi was the "spokesman" for JAS and the operator of the Al-Urhwa Al-Wutqha Twitter account that JAS used to advertise its intended pledge to al-Baghdadi, made in March 2015. It is unlikely to have been coincidental that Al-Urhwa Al-Wutqha resurrected the profile of the late Muhammed Yusuf, al-Barnawi's father, a figure that had been nearly absent in Shekau's messaging (Twitter, March 3, 2015). Al-Barnawi then ran several Twitter accounts to advertise the new West Africa Province after Shekau's pledge in March 2015, but those were short-lived. Several members of his media team were killed in battle, Twitter blocked the accounts, and Algerian and Tunisian security forces killed his partners in Africa Media (@bernawi10 still is active but appears to be unused).

In the months after Shekau's pledge, al-Barnawi's faction of West Africa Province continued to release videos representing the group. The videos promoted the establishment of an Islamic State in northeastern Nigeria and its control over large swathes of territory, as well as advertising the group's victories over Nigerian troops and the regional nature of West Africa Province, including

making threats to the African Union and neighboring countries (Twitter, June 2, 2015).

Notably, as with the pre-pledge Al-Urhuwa Al-Wutqha Twitter account, Shekau was absent in early West Africa Province messaging, despite IS recognition of him as the *wali*. This was likely because al-Barnawi still controlled West Africa Province media and was not eager to feature Shekau, who al-Barnawi accepted as *wali* but whose visibility al-Barnawi wanted to manage.

In August and September 2015, the first signs of a leadership tussle in West Africa Province became visible. Shekau issued two West Africa Province audio messages that affirmed his leadership after rumors surfaced he had been deposed (Twitter, August 16, 2015; Twitter, September 19, 2015). While it is unclear what transpired internally, over the next few months the al-Barnawi “fingerprint” was reduced in West Africa Province videos. Instead, Shekau’s faction had a more obvious presence. For example, one of his military amirs appeared with several hundred worshippers in videos of Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr sermons in September 2015; led dozens of militants in a group pledge to al-Baghdadi in October 2015; and was the “judge” in a sharia punishment video a month later in November (Youtube, December 13, 2014; naji.com, September 28, 2015; Twitter, November 2, 2015). Although al-Barnawi still had control over West Africa Province’s video propaganda and its lines of communications to IS, he seems to have allowed Shekau and Shekau’s faction to take more of the center stage in West Africa Province in mid-to-late 2015.

After November 2015, however, West Africa Province media became virtually silent until the Niger attacks in May 2016. This suggests that control of West Africa Province media was once again denied to Shekau’s faction and returned to al-Barnawi’s faction by the time of the Niger offensive. This may be why Shekau’s faction accused al-Barnawi of “manipulating” IS and complained about Shekau’s messages not being transferred to al-Baghdadi (Vanguard, August).

Different Approaches

An assessment of the al-Barnawi faction and Shekau faction videos (as well as the history of operations of both factions) shows differences in their styles. Shekau faction videos tended to feature masses of fighters congregating, which is consistent with his faction’s grassroots and

“insurgency”-based approach to violence. Al-Barnawi faction videos tend to be “action-scenes” that emphasize raids on military barracks (consistent with his targeting preferences to avoid large-scale civilian casualties) in Nigeria or in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon so as not appear to fight exclusively in Nigeria.

In sum, the key difference is that Shekau is *territorial-focused* while al-Barnawi, like his Ansaru predecessors, prefers *versatility* and not to be pinned down to a single base. As al-Barnawi sees it, relying too much on territory, such as Shekau’s bases in Sambisa, is a risk because the military can overrun and capture it. Moreover, with his faction’s AQIM and Ansaru pedigree his fighters have likely learned lessons from failed al-Qaeda affiliate attempts to hold territory in Yemen in 2010 and northern Mali in 2012, and the importance of adopting a gradual approach to winning hearts and minds before controlling territory.

Given that the promotion of the West Africa Province attacks in Niger emphasized first that these were raids, second that they were on military targets, third that there was a regional aspect (fighting the Africa Union), and fourth coincided with al-Barnawi’s reasserted leadership of West Africa Province, it appears likely that al-Barnawi’s faction was behind the Niger offensive.

Moreover, al-Barnawi provided justification for the operation as “self-defense” in his interview with IS on August 3 in which IS announced he was the *wali* of West Africa Province.

In his interview, Al-Barnawi said:

[Africa Union forces] operate their heinous war through a joint operations room in Niger. If they want to launch an attack on us, they would send against us the American and French forces that are present in Niger, and the unmanned aerial vehicles to observe the locations, and then the joint forces launch the attack with intense aerial bombardment (Twitter, August 3).

Possible Realignment With AQIM

A number of historical, strategic, and messaging indicators suggest al-Barnawi’s faction of West Africa Province had a lead role in the Niger offensive. Yet these same indicators – as well as al-Barnawi’s faction’s ideological and operational proximity to al-Qaeda – suggest he may

consider the West Africa Province affiliation useful for deposing Shekau and generating media “buzz” for his Niger offensive, but less beneficial as a way of empowering West Africa Province operationally.

In the long-term, al-Barnawi may renew collaboration with AQIM, which would also be consistent with the way al-Qaeda affiliates have been infiltrating, weakening and winning back those who defected to IS. Al-Barnawi also seemed to acknowledge the debt he owes AQIM in his August 3 interview, where he credited AQIM with training his father’s disciples in the “Greater Sahara” after his father’s death.

Any new al-Qaeda realignment, however, would likely come disguised as a “local movement.” Due to al-Qaeda’s subtle expansionist strategy, it will likely come with less promotion than West Africa Province’s arrival, but with no less violent effects. AQIM’s strong presence in nearby Mali could facilitate upgraded coordination with West Africa Province.

Much will depend, however, on whether al-Qaeda can provide a suitable alternative vision to the caliphate, which has a distinct attraction to both al-Barnawi and Shekau. If the IS caliphate manages to survive despite ongoing pressure against it in Libya, Iraq, and Syria, it could be enough to not only keep al-Barnawi with IS but to spur a reconciliation between him and Shekau under the West Africa Province umbrella.

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