

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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BURKINA FASO: LINES BETWEEN AL-QAEDA AND JNIM BLUR

Brian Perkins

Militant violence continues to increase in Burkina Faso as both local and regional militant organizations have spread within the country. Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) has long been the primary al-Qaeda-linked group in Burkina Faso and has claimed responsibility for countless attacks, including twin bombings in March 2018 that targeted the Burkinabe Army headquarters and French Embassy in Ouagadougou ([Al Akhbar](#), March 3). Al-Qaeda, however, formally announced its presence in Burkina Faso on September 18 sparking confusion as to the group's relationship with JNIM and raising the specter of further violence in the coming months.

Al-Qaeda's announcement of their presence in Burkina Faso was made via a video posted on their Telegram channel on September 18 that depicted a group of fighters, who are possibly from the al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansaroul Islam. The speaker of the group vowed to respond to tyrants within the country ([Jihadology](#), September 18). The announcement came as somewhat of a

surprise as many analysts have considered JNIM to be al-Qaeda's wing in Burkina Faso, but the purported al-Qaeda fighters made no mention of the group. JNIM, meanwhile, released its own video just weeks later echoing a similar narrative but focusing specifically on French involvement in the country ([Malijet](#), October 10). The video placed the group within the context of the broader al-Qaeda organization. The disparities between the two releases seemingly indicate that the two groups are not as closely coordinated or linked as many believe and that al-Qaeda's cell in Burkina Faso will be a separate entity from JNIM.

It is unclear what the relationship between the al-Qaeda cell and JNIM will look like moving forward, but an official al-Qaeda presence in Burkina Faso is likely to alter the strategic calculus of the forces currently involved in the fight against terrorism within the country. The two video releases came amid an increase in attacks by militant groups and French operations within the country, including the first French air operations against militants in Burkina Faso ([Africa News](#), October 8). These operations took place in the eastern Pama region of the country as militancy has spread from embattled northern regions to the forested areas near the border with Ghana, Togo and Benin. French Minister of Armed Forces, Florence Parly, confirmed on October 8 that three more

significant operations were to take place in the coming weeks ([Le Telegramme](#), October 8).

Earlier in the year, reports emerged that the United States planned to reduce its Special Operations troop presence in the region ([New York Times](#), September 2). On October 8, however, U.S. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis announced that the United States would not reduce its support to the French-led mission in the region ([Reuters](#), October 2). He did not mention earlier plans to reduce the U.S. troop presence, but it is likely that recent developments will weigh on this decision as further details emerge regarding the alleged al-Qaeda cell in Burkina Faso.

YEMEN: SOUTHERN YEMEN ON THE BRINK OF FURTHER VIOLENCE

Brian Perkins

The ongoing conflict between the Southern Transitional Council, a UAE-backed secessionist political body established in 2017, and President Hadi has long been overshadowed by the fight against the Houthis. Recent developments in Aden and the reshuffling of positions within the Hadi government have underscored the potential for a broader, more violent conflict to open in southern Yemen in the coming months. Similarly, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are increasingly at odds due to the divergent positions of the local forces they have backed in southern Yemen.

After days of tense protests, the Southern Transitional Council called for a popular uprising against the Hadi government in an official press release on October 3 ([STC](#), October 3). The press release cited the deteriorating economic and living conditions in southern Yemen and the alleged corruption of government officials. The release coincided with protests in several southern towns and cities. The government quickly denounced the calls for an uprising, noting that government security forces would not allow unrest and subversion. In an apparent attempt to appease the Southern Transitional Council, Hadi sacked Prime Minister Ahmed Bin Daghr and appointed Maeen Abdul Malek Saeed ([Gulf News](#), October 18). The Southern Transitional Council has already rejected the move, noting that it does not go high enough to address the problems ([Middle East Eye](#), October 3). The Southern Transitional Council will likely continue their calls for an uprising as Hadi's legitimacy continues to wane and their popular support grows in the South.

The latest tensions between the Southern Transitional Council and Hadi came against a backdrop of dozens of assassinations of pro-Hadi members of Islah—which the UAE considers to be Yemen's version of the Muslim Brotherhood—and revelations that UAE-hired private military contractors (PMC) were behind the killings ([Buzfeed](#), October 16). The UAE has long been implicated in the mysterious assassinations of Islah politicians, imams, and teachers as locals and pundits suggested Emirati troops or UAE-backed southern forces were responsible. Despite the implications, the UAE had managed to maintain a degree of separation from the inci-

dents until a contractor from the US-based PMC Spear Operations Group revealed he had helped carry out a campaign of targeted assassinations on behalf of the Emirati government.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have publicly claimed to be aligned in their priority to support Hadi and restore his government, but the UAE has vehemently supported the Southern Transitional Council and pro-secession forces while Saudi Arabia has provided its support to pro-Hadi forces and Islah. Tensions between the two countries over their proxies in Yemen have undoubtedly been simmering beneath the surface but the revelation that the UAE is behind a targeted campaign against Saudi-backed, pro-Hadi Islah fighters could bring these tensions to the fore. While diplomatic tensions between the two nations are possible, the conflict will likely manifest on the ground in Yemen between pro-Hadi forces and UAE-backed security forces. Violence between Islah and southern forces are likely to escalate considerably in the coming weeks, particularly if assassinations continue and the Southern Transitional Council builds momentum with its call to topple the Hadi government.

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Governance and Resilience: Countering IS and Stabilizing Eastern Syria

Nidal Betare

Under the previous Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, Damascus balanced its relationship with tribes in the Der Ezzor area by building relationships with certain traditional tribal leaders. Loyalties were secured through parliamentary seats, and by helping secure broader tribal allegiance through favor and reward. This agreement began to unravel, however, when the regime lost control over the Der Ezzor province with the start of the revolution in 2011, and later due to a series of actors and developments over the last seven years.

Destruction of the Social Structure

In June 2011, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) took control of the province, but it was short-lived as the Syrian regime retook the Der Ezzor city in July. The second liberation of the province began in early 2012, but many residents fled due to the heavy fighting, and local tribal leaders lost much of their influence and connection to the Syrian regime. [1]

Under the FSA's control of the province, especially after 2012, each tribe formed its own armed group and managed the local economy by dividing regional oil resources between themselves. As a result, the FSA's control over the region was not centralized, allowing other actors such as the al-Qaeda affiliated group Jabhat al Nusra (today known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS) to secure its own areas of influence. [2]

When Islamic State (IS) took over the province in 2014, it destroyed remaining tribal leadership structures and built new alliances under its control. It committed massacres against certain tribes in Der Ezzor, most notably the al-Shaitat tribe massacre in which IS killed more than 700 members, specifically targeting boys 14-years-old and older. This resulted in an escalation of bloody conflict between and among the tribes ([Zaman al-Wasl](#), August 12, 2014). [3]

At the same time, IS established new governing institutions to manage the daily life of the people, including a

taxation system and an educational system beginning at the elementary school level. The presence of IS continued to change the dynamics of local society, and as a result, a large number of residents fled the area. IS created new tribal leadership structures to strengthen its rule of the society and control the relationship dynamics between the tribes.

Beginning in late 2014 the U.S.-led coalition and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) liberated most of Der Ezzor from IS control ([Al Arabiya](#), July 15, 2014). This began another political struggle when both the U.S.-backed Kurds and the Turkish government began to compete over the building of a governance body for the province. The Turks supported building a local council in Turkey to represent Der Ezzor in an effort to secure loyalty to Turkey in Der Ezzor through this local council and their relationship with tribal and community leaders still based in Der Ezzor ([Baladi](#), August 10, 2017). At the same time, the Kurds formed a civil council based on a Kurdish understanding of a social contract that they are currently working to fully articulate and establish ([Deir Ezzor24](#), September 25, 2017). [4]

It should be noted, at a certain point, the Der Ezzor local council based in Turkey was willing to return to Syria and encourage other refugees and internally displaced people to follow their lead. They asked the U.S. government through back channels to give them guarantees for their safety and to support their return as leaders of their tribes. The United States, however, did not respond to this offer, which was interpreted by the local council as a “no.” [5] As a result, the exiled leadership of Der Ezzor became further fragmented and made the possibility of unifying leaders and the communities of Der Ezzor more difficult.

Kurds Attempt to Govern Jazira Region

Further to the north, the Kurdish populated areas also began to change. The Kurdish communities were already politically divided, and so political parties adopted different responses to the Syrian conflict and built independent alliances with regional and international powers, including with Turkey, the United States, the Kurdish Regional Government, and the Syrian regime ([Enab Baladi](#), May 4, 2015). Out of these alliances, the Kurdish-U.S. alliance remains the strongest due to their shared security goal of defeating IS. Outside of this objective, there is no clear shared political agenda. The

United States has never promised to support any Kurdish entity in Syria.

In the Jazira areas under the control of the Self Administration Authority (SAA), they have pursued a governance system building off of old governance structures, but with a Marxist influence that divides the area into provincial cantons and communes and enforces norms that do not take into consideration differences between communities and socio-economic challenges. [6] One example of this is the women’s law issued by the SAA. A progressive law by comparison to others in the region, it prohibits many historic Arab-Islamic traditional practices. This includes polygamy and unequal inheritance practices. [7] This has increased tension with traditional tribal groups, creating increased tension and distance between the governance system and locals. The situation has resulted in further deepening the trust deficit between the Arabs and the Kurds. [8]

The Regime in Der Ezzor

Meanwhile, the regime has been working to build more relationships with tribal members and has issued policy it calls “fighting the American occupation” ([Deirezzor24](#), July 4). To implement this policy, the regime is supporting tribal diversity, mainly the Albakkara people through tribal leader Nawaf al-Bashir. Damascus is reasserting the role of the al-Ba’ath party and its ideology among the tribes. The regime’s alliance building is further strengthened by the Iranian strategy of using militias to control areas along the Euphrates River through a religiously driven social service system. The system is focused on converting more villagers from Sunni to Shiite ([PDC](#), August 24).

Within this context, the inhabitants of the Der Ezzor province are living among diverse ethnic and tribal divisions and tensions, and competing spheres of influence and governance strategies. Those remaining in the SAA governed and U.S.-influenced areas in the Der Ezzor province are increasingly isolated and have developed a strong Arab-Sunni victimization narrative as a result of the increased ethnic and sectarian divisions emerging in the area. This has further decreased these different communities’ interest and willingness to be integrated into the SAA system, resulting in a divided Der Ezzor province—less resilient and more vulnerable to the resurgence of malevolent actors, including IS, the regime and its allies.

The United States and Stabilizing Eastern Syria

Within this climate, the United States is pursuing a stabilization policy based on rebuilding the old tribal system in the region and restructuring it under the Kurdish Authority represented by the SAA. However, the approach of building up the civil council through tribal alliances cannot stabilize the region since the tribal leaders no longer represent the society they are trying to govern, as described above. [9] For this reason, the current U.S. strategy risks further dividing the population, resulting in an escalation of tension between the remaining tribes, while failing to resolve the political and security vacuum these competing governance structures have created in the province. This will likely result in a resurgent IS once all of Der Ezzor has been liberated by the U.S.-backed SDF and leave the region vulnerable to being retaken by the Syrian regime and its ally, Iran. [10]

Instead, the United States should assume a stronger role and use a different and more unifying governance approach, resilient to outside destabilizing forces. The current divisions and competing spheres of influence could be addressed by reshaping the civil council composition the United States is trying to rehabilitate through ensuring inclusive and locally representative civil councils. Currently, the only factor keeping this bad situation from deteriorating further is the presence of the U.S. Army. Once they leave, it is almost guaranteed further chaos and disorder will follow.

Notes

[1] in my last trip to Der Ezzor in August 2011 right after the regime retook the province, the city looked like a ghost city, some areas were completely empty, the destruction in buildings and prosperities was clear and seen

[2] See research by [Ayn Almadina](#)

[3] An interview Oct, 12th 2018 with the executive director of Deir Ezzor24: According to him, Ja'afar Al-Khalifa fighter from Al Saitat tribe, who gave a pledge to ISIS, is responsible of this massacre.

[4] See social contract document <http://cantonafarin.com/ar/pages/Charter%20of%20the%20social%20contract.html>

[5] The author attended one of these Skype meetings

[6] An interview Oct, 10th 2018 with a former high senior officer at the Self -Administration Authority

[7] Ibid.

[8] An interview on October, 5th 2018 with a civil society activist in Der Ezzor

[9] An interview Oct, 12th 2018 with Omar Abu Laila, the executive director of Deir Ezzor24

[10] Ibid

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Ahvaz Attack: Iran Blames U.S., Arab Rivals and Consolidates Control

Rafid Jaboori

A small group of gunmen attacked a military parade of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on September 22 in the city of Ahvaz in the southwest of Iran. At least 29 people were killed and more than 60 injured in the attack, which happened in the regional capital of the Khuzestan province, where ethnic Arabs form the majority of the population ([Arabi 21](#), September 22). Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility. The Iranian government, however, insisted that the attack was the work of local Arab nationalist groups with backing from Arab nations and the United States ([Al Jazeera](#), September 22).

The states that the Iranian government has accused of being behind the attack have vehemently denied any involvement. There was an initial claim of responsibility from Ahvaz Arab nationalists, however it was somewhat vague and attributed the attack to Ahvazi resistance—more of a generic expression than one particular group ([Al Qabas](#), September 24). On the other hand, IS's claim of responsibility came with a video of three of the alleged attackers. The video was published by IS media arm Amaaq news agency ([Al Arabiya](#), September 23).

IS Eyeing Iran

By targeting Iran, IS is seeking to consolidate its claim of representing the Sunnis of the Middle East and prove its credentials as a Salafi jihadist group. In a landmark 2014 statement about the division between IS and al-Qaeda, previous IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani criticized al-Qaeda leader Aymen al-Zawahiri for blocking the jihadists from attacking Iran. Al-Zawahiri, according to the statement, did not want the fight with the United States and its allies to be distracted by fighting the Shia ([Al Arabiya](#), May 14, 2014). IS launched its first major attack in Iran on June 7, 2017, when it targeted the Iranian parliament and the shrine of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini. ([Al Jazeera](#), June 11, 2017).

Iran and Responsibility

Iran's insistence on ignoring IS's claim of responsibility for the Ahvaz attack could be understood in the context of the regime's handling of the public protests and Iran's confrontation with the United States and its allies. Since U.S. President Donald Trump announced the withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and re-imposed sanctions on Iran, the pressure has significantly increased on the Iranian regime. Although the United States maintains that it does not have a regime change policy in Iran, Tehran is worried about the potential consequences of people's resentment toward the regime and the economic difficulties the country is experiencing. In recent months, there have been several public protest in various cities across Iran ([Sky News Arabia](#), July 1).

As much as the Iranian regime is willing to direct its people's anger after the Ahvaz attack toward the United States and other national enemies, it also seems to be willing to play down any indication of IS involvement. One of the main themes of the public protests in recent months was protesters' opposition to Iran's involvement in Syria and Iraq and other parts of the Middle East ([Youm 7](#), June 24). Protesters linked the economic hardship inside Iran to its military involvement outside Iran. The regime claims that confronting IS outside Iran aims to stop it from launching operations inside Iran, and accepting IS's claim of responsibility for the Ahvaz attack could cause more public anger ([Al Dostor](#), April 23, 2016).

On the other hand, promoting the theory of Ahvaz separatists involvement with alleged backing from the United States, Sunni Arab countries, Israel and even remnants of Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime seems to be a more convenient cause to rally the support of the Iranian people ([Arab48](#), September 22).

Khuzestan is Iran's richest province—80 percent of Iran's oil exports come from the province and most of its oil and natural gas reserves are under Khuzestan's soil. The province and its predominantly Arab population, however, suffer neglect, lack of development and heavy handed security measures ([Sky News Arabia](#), April 3).

The Ahvazi nationalists attribute all that to discrimination against Arabs from a Farsi dominated government. Ahvazi Arab nationalist movements have been calling for national rights for the Arab people of Khuzestan for decades. Those who resorted to violence have launched several attacks on the regime's military and economic

assets. The most prominent of the Ahvazi groups operate in exile and call for independence of the province, which they believe was annexed illegally by Iran in 1925.

The Harakat al-Nidhal al-Arabi (Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz, or HNA) is one of those groups. It was founded in 1999 and since 2005 has claimed to have a military presence on the ground in Khuzestan. It was the spokesman of the group who claimed that Ahvazi nationalists launched the attack, but he provided no further evidence. In fact, the group later distanced itself from any involvement in the attack apparently after IS's claim of responsibility ([Ahwazona](#), September 23).

IS is well known for not working with nationalist groups of any type. It is unlikely that IS would coordinate with other groups in Iran. Iranian authorities run the country tightly, making such operations hard to coordinate. Both IS and nationalist groups never claimed that they coordinated with each other in the recent attack in Ahvaz or elsewhere. IS, however, has shown significant ability to exploit the public resentment of marginalized communities against exclusionary governments. This pattern was clear in the Sunni areas in Iraq and it led to major IS expansion and military advances in 2014. [1]

No clear signs of the swift Iranian response that Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif vowed have emerged. Iran's response, however, might not come in a clear or immediate shape. Putting the attack in the context of Iran's confrontation with the United States and with regional foes is a very convenient position for Tehran. Doing so, however, also adds to the tension in the broader Middle East, between Iran and its allies on the one side and its regional opponents on the other.

By launching the attack, IS demonstrated for the second time that despite its retreat from most of its strongholds in Iraq and Syria, it is able to hit Iran, the major Shia powerhouse in the Middle East. Operations against Iran, which have proven difficult, will always be important for IS in order to consolidate its status as the most powerful jihadist group even as its Caliphate is in tatters with military defeats in Iraq and Syria. ([Arabi21](#), September 26).

Iran maintains that it is fair to its Arab and other ethnic and sectarian minorities. Therefore, it is unlikely to embrace reform in provinces like Kurdistan, Sistan-Baluchistan or Khuzestan. These areas contain widespread pub-

lic discontent and the most economically vulnerable suffering due to the U.S. sanctions. They will likely experience more violence from the regime and the separatist groups.

Notes

[1] Shia Islam in Iran is in the position of the Church of The State since the Savaid Dynasty rule in the 16th century. That status was enhanced further after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Although most of the Ahvazi Arabs are Shia they claim that they are discriminated against because of their ethnicity. Interestingly there has been a growing movement of converting to Sunni Islam among Ahvazi in order to distinct themselves completely from the Iranian rulers and their faith. Active insurgencies also exist in the ethnic Baluchi majority Sistan-Baluchistan province south east of Iran and the Kurdish majority Kurdistan province in the north west, populations in both provinces are Sunni Mulsim. There has not been major IS infiltration in those regions yet.

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Boko Haram's Ultra-Extremist Side Resurfaces: From the Execution of Mamman Nur to Humanitarian Workers

Jacob Zenn

In September, reports emerged that one of Boko Haram's longstanding leaders, Mamman Nur, was assassinated. His killers were not from the Nigerian military, which had long pursued him. The Nigerian government first declared Nur wanted after he allegedly masterminded the suicide bombing at the UN building in Abuja in August 2011, killing 23 people ([Vanguard, September 19, 2011](#)). Rather, Nur's killers were from his own group—the Islamic State-loyal faction of Boko Haram, which is called Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). It was not an ordinary assassination; it was fratricide.

Why would ISWAP members kill Mamman Nur? He was, after all, one of the group's leading preachers alongside the group's founder, Muhammed Yusuf, before the group launched the current phase of the jihad in July 2009. Ironically, the current ISWAP leader himself, Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi, is Muhammed Yusuf's son. Nur was also widely reported to have set up Boko Haram training camps in Cameroon in 2010 and to have led up to 90 Boko Haram members in training with al-Shabab in 2010 before they returned to Nigeria in 2011 ([Treasury.gov, December 1, 2015](#); [Vanguard, September 3, 2011](#)). Boko Haram forewarned its first suicide bombing at the Federal Police headquarters in Abuja in June 2011 by stating in an interview with AFP before the attack that the group's "brothers returned from Somalia where they trained in real warfare" ([AFP, June 15, 2011](#)). Presumably, Nur's trainees and network were involved in the attack.

Nur was also involved in campaigning to convince Islamic State to drop Abubakar Shekau from the ISWAP leadership position, which led the Islamic State to name Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi as the new ISWAP leader in August 2016 ([Soundcloud.com, August 5, 2016](#)). Nur had complained about Shekau's excessive use of takfir (excommunication) and alleged Shekau violated Islamic State's orders by keeping Muslim schoolgirls as "slaves", in-

cluding some from the infamous Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping in April 2014. Nur, in fact, stated that Islamic State ordered Muslim women to be killed if they were apostates but not held as "slaves." Nur also accused Shekau of stealing from civilians, being a megalomaniac, and killing sub-commanders for unproven or minor infractions.

Early Nur-Shekau Disputes

Mamman Nur and Abubakar Shekau engaged in disputes since as early as Muhammed Yusuf's death in July 2009. A Nur loyalist who worked in the house of Babakura Fugu, who was the brother-in-law of Muhammed Yusuf, for example, reportedly assassinated Fugu in 2011 ([Vanguard, September 19, 2011](#)). Fugu was scheduled to meet the Borno state deputy governor for the second time before he was assassinated. He had also provided documents to former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo to give to then president Goodluck Jonathan related to negotiations to end the budding Boko Haram insurgency. At least one of the terms of a deal would have been government compensation to the Fugu family for the killing of Muhammed Yusuf.

The precise timing of Fugu's assassination was also suspect: he had just finished a pre-interview phone call with Sahara Reporters media agency in which he had begun discussing the origins of the group during the period shari'a law implemented in northern Nigeria between 1999 and 2001 ([Sahara Reporters, September 18, 2011](#)). In any event, although a Nur loyalist was the assassin, Shekau was reported to have opposed Fugu's assassination. Shekau believed the Fugu family had the right to seek any redress for Muhammed Yusuf's killing ([Vanguard, September 19, 2011](#)).

In subsequent years, Nur had been involved in separate negotiations with the government ([Treasury.gov, December 1, 2015](#); [Vanguard, November 5, 2012](#)). Nur loyalists also considered him more to be more qualified to lead Boko Haram than Shekau because of his contacts in Somalia and to al-Qaeda ([Vanguard, September 3, 2011](#)). Shekau, in contrast, is not known to have spent significant time, or any time at all, with jihadists abroad. Since 2013, Shekau also has been adamant that Boko Haram would not negotiate with the Nigerian government ([Vanguard, November 10, 2014](#)). Shekau disclaimed any negotiators who claimed to be acting on behalf of Boko Haram.

Nevertheless, on tactical issues—not broader peace deals—such as the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping, Shekau was reluctant but willing to negotiate. In 2016, he approved the release of more than 100 of the schoolgirls for a reported ransom and the release of at least five Boko Haram prisoners (Punch.ng, [December 24, 2017](http://Punch.ng)). Aside from the freed schoolgirls, 112 have remained missing, several dozen died in captivity and the others have “chosen” to remain with their Boko Haram “husbands.”

ISWAP's Extreme Turn

The assassination of Nur was followed by ISWAP's assassination of another ISWAP commander, Ali Gaga. He was a cattle herder who joined ISWAP in 2015 and was reportedly planning to surrender with up to 300 ISWAP hostages. Nur, therefore, is believed to have been killed for similar reasons as Ali Gaga—becoming a “traitor” and discussing through mediators “peace talks” with the government ([Premium Times](http://PremiumTimes.com), [September 30](http://PremiumTimes.com)). Nur's assassination also comes in the context of ISWAP's release of over 100 Muslim schoolgirls kidnapped in March in Dapchi, Yobe State by ISWAP hardliners. Those schoolgirls were released after Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi, supported by Nur, demanded their release on grounds that ISWAP does not kidnap and “enslave” Muslims ([The Guardian](http://TheGuardian.com), [March 21](http://TheGuardian.com)). Only one of those schoolgirls was kept in captivity, Leah Sharibu, because she is a Christian and refused conversion to Islam.

According to the Chief Military Press Information Officer of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in N'Djamena, Chad, Nur has been replaced by a “Shekau type of terrorist,” Muhammed Kirmimma (ZYen.com.ng, [October 8](http://ZYen.com.ng)). Kirmimma is second-in-command in ISWAP behind Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi. What this means is that there is increasingly little difference between ISWAP and Shekau's faction of Boko Haram. Although Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi loyalists under the military command of Abu Fatima defeated Shekau loyalists after al-Barnawi was announced as ISWAP leader in August 2016, now it appears Shekau is gaining strength in his rivalry with al-Barnawi (Aymennjawad.org, [August 5](http://Aymennjawad.org)). Shekau could make a renewed attempt at taking over the reins of ISWAP from Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi or may seek some form of merger with Kirmimma, possibly facilitated by Islamic State's overall leadership, which would like ISWAP to be unified.

The latest evidence of ISWAP's ultra-extremism is its filmed executions of two women, Saifura Ahmed and Hauwa Liman, in September and October, respectively. They were both humanitarian workers for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Rann, Borno State and were kidnapped in March. According to ISWAP:

Saifura and Hauwa were killed because they are considered as *murtads* (apostates) by the group because they were once Muslims that have abandoned their Islam the moment they chose to work with the Red Cross, and for us, there is no difference between Red Cross and UNICEF.

ISWAP also noted Leah Sharibu would become a “slave for life” and Alice Ngaddah, a Christian who worked with UNICEF in Rann, would also be kept as a slave. According to ISWAP, “Based on our doctrines, it is now lawful for us to do whatever we want to do with them” (Thecable.ng, [October 15](http://Thecable.ng)). Indeed, it is not certain Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi would have opposed killing Saifura Ahmed and Hauwa Liman, for he declared when he became the ISWAP leader that the group would target “Christian proselytizing organizations”, which includes ICRC and UNICEF ([Al-Naba 41](http://Al-Naba.com), [August 2, 2016](http://Al-Naba.com)). ISWAP is also abiding to its previous commitment to the Islamic State to “enslave” Christians but kill Muslim “apostates.”

Conclusion

If Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi represents the “moderate” side of ISWAP and he is still this extreme, one can expect increased atrocities from the group. In light of Nur's assassination, he will also be pressured by hardliners in ISWAP to accept some of their more brutal operations and tactics and to avoid any tactical-level or broader negotiations with the Nigerian government. After several recent successful attacks on military barracks in northeastern Nigeria, ISWAP is sufficiently armed to continue to wage the insurgency for months, if not years ahead. This indicates that the war with the Nigerian state will grind on and that civilians will increasingly become targets for ISWAP whether for “apostasy” or, in the case of Christians, “slavery.” ISWAP, however, may come to a thaw in its rivalry with Shekau and possibly increase coordination with his faction, although this is not something Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi would want. He none-

theless may be beholden to his hardliners on this issue as well.

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