

Terrorism Monitor

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MOZAMBIQUE: EXPLORING TENTATIVE LINKS BETWEEN ISLAMIC STATE, ADF, AND ANSAR AL-SUNNAH

Brian M. Perkins

Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for an attack in Mozambique on June 4, the first such claim in the country. The attack was claimed by the newly minted Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), which has also taken responsibility for a series of attacks in territory controlled by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The claim in Mozambique stated that its fighters repelled an attack by the Mozambican army in the village of Metubi in Mocimboa district and that its fighters killed and wounded several officers, making off with a stash of weapons.

The veracity of ISCAP's claim is still unclear as is the accuracy of details regarding the timing and location of the attack to which the group is referring, which possibly occurred on May 28 when the Mozambican Army soldiers were involved in a clash with militants in Cabo Delgado's Macomia district ([Daily Maverick](#), June 5). The claim also referred to Metubi village,

which is in Quissanga district rather than Mocimboa da Praia or Macomia ([AllAfrica](#), June 6). Police officials have also refuted the claim, which has been a common theme as police officials commonly attribute attacks to unknown criminals rather than Ansar al-Sunna.

It is entirely possible that ISCAP had nothing to do with the purported attack or that no such attack happened as its claim fits their overall narrative and efforts to project growth in Africa. It is also possible that the confusion over locations between verifiable attacks and the details of the claim is a result of communication issues between those on the ground and the propaganda wing releasing the public statement. Regardless of the claim's veracity, it does point to IS' growing attention to Mozambique. Similarly, the claim raises several interesting questions and points to underlying suspicions regarding ISCAP's presence in the DRC, relationship with ADF, and the mysterious insurgency boiling in northern Mozambique.

The insurgency Ansar al-Sunnah has waged in Mozambique has perplexed analysts across the world, and much of the conversation surrounding the group's activity is speculation. Nonetheless, it is vitally important to explore even tentative connections between

ISCAP and militants in northern Mozambique. ISCAP has seemingly made its way into the DRC through the ADF, or at least factions of that group that have trended more toward a hardline jihadist ideology that falls in line with IS. Meanwhile, the increasing evidence of ties between ADF in DRC and IS has also coincided with reports of ADF activity spilling into northern Mozambique from Uganda, a phenomenon not previously reported in that area. Most notably, Mozambican authorities arrested six Ugandans reportedly belonging to 'The City of Monotheism and Monotheists' (*Madinat Tawhid-wa-l-Muwahidin*—MTM), which is the rebranded faction of the ADF most likely to have links with ISCAP. The arrests reportedly occurred around May 2018 when Mozambican security forces raided a terrorist camp in Mocimboa da Praia, one of the main centers of Ansar al-Sunnah activity. Among those arrested was Abdul Rahman Faisal Nsamba, an alleged MTM member and leader of the Usafi Mosque in Kampala, which was raided by Ugandan forces for allegedly being a terrorist hideout with a storied history involving former ADF members ([All-Africa](#), May 9, 2018).

Aside from the more direct links suggested by these arrests, it is also possible that Ansar al-Sunnah is loosely linked to factions of ADF through smuggling networks that bring gold, ivory, and timber out of the Congo, Uganda, and Tanzania to coastal Mozambique. The arrest of Ugandans allegedly tied to the Islamist faction of the ADF in Ansar al-Sunnah's area of operations, provides—if even just tentative—a potential link between the so-called ISCAP group in DRC and militants in Mozambique. Even if this connection has not been thoroughly established yet and the claim was false, IS is clearly paying attention to the insurgency in Mozambique and ISCAP is the most likely province to engage in outreach to eventually build a connection.

Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

YEMEN: HOW DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN YEMEN AFFECTS THE NORTH-SOUTH DYNAMIC

Brian M. Perkins

The UAE has signed a \$100 million deal to build a power plant in the southern port city of Aden. The agreement was signed between Abu Dhabi's Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation for Humanitarian Works and Yemen's Ministry of Electricity ([Middle East Monitor](#), June 13). It is unclear when the project will start but it is expected to generate 120 megawatts and provide electricity to nearly 3 million Yemenis. The planned project is undoubtedly a positive step toward improving the lives of Yemenis, but it does bring with it a host of implications and second order effects worthy of discussion. This article is not at all intended to debate the merits of the power plant, but instead to demonstrate how such a project fits into the UAE's longer-term goals and how positive development in southern Yemen will shift the historical north-south dynamic.

The UAE has undoubtedly saved and improved countless lives through much needed humanitarian aid and development projects, but at the same time, it is clear that the country has deeper long term strategic and economic goals for Yemen that these projects help serve. Among those goals is to establish a foothold at vital ports such as Aden and ingratiate themselves with locals as well as the government, which will be absolutely essential to achieving these aims. A similar but smaller scale approach has also been taking place on the island of Socotra, another strategic interest but one that has not felt the harsh effects of the war ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 7).

The UAE has been extremely calculating in the connections it has built in southern Yemen through its ties with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the establishment of various security forces. Meanwhile, development projects such as the power plant have also coincided with its interests. As the war drags on there are important dynamics that will play out as a result of their strategic interests and involvement.

The most talked about dynamic is the rising call for secession among supporters of the STC and activists in southern Yemen. While southern secession would likely serve Abu Dhabi's goals, it still remains a relatively unlikely outcome at this point in time, with some sort of federal system being more likely. The matter of inde-

pendence for southern Yemen will be a stumbling block for any future settlement and could see a new violent conflict arise post settlement, particularly in view of disparities in development between north and south.

The power plant project also points to the inevitable shift of the dynamic between north and south Yemen. Southern Yemen has historically been marginalized in comparison to northern Yemen, with public infrastructure, development projects, and jobs always favoring northern governorates and people. The ongoing war, however, will undoubtedly start to shift that dynamic in favor of southern Yemen for two primary reasons—the disruption of longstanding northern patronage networks within the government and the devastating toll the war has had on the economy and infrastructure in northern Yemen. Southern governorates were largely spared the destruction northern Yemen has experienced and because there are no longer active fronts against the Houthis there, development projects have been underway for quite some time and will continue as the war drags on. Meanwhile, the north continues to be destroyed with no way of rebuilding vital infrastructure and homes until hostilities end. As such, when the war does come to an end, southern Yemen will be years ahead in terms of development and working infrastructure, despite still being plagued with its own problems. This fact will continue to feed animosity between the north and south whenever a settlement does come and will play into the calculations of whatever government does arise.

The UAE's attempts to lay claim to southern Yemen and boost its economy will continue long after the war ends, and it is unclear who will be the main party to help pick up the pieces in northern Yemen, but the rate of development in southern Yemen will outpace the north. What is clear, however, is that the prominent political players in southern Yemen are unlikely interested in allowing money generated in southern Yemen to be used to help rebuild the north rather than keeping it for its own development. This fact will undoubtedly shape the outcome of any future settlement.

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Residual, Not Irrelevant: AQIM's Lingering Threat to the Maghreb

Dario Cristiani

Introduction

After the establishment of *Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen* (The Group for Support of Islam and Muslims—JNIM) in March 2017, the geographic shift characterizing al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) strategic trajectory became even more visible. The group became primarily focused on the Sahelian space, and its presence in the Maghreb has since been considered almost irrelevant. The latter region serves mainly as a logistic platform to support AQIM's operations in the Sahel, as in the case of Libya. Yet, the weakening of AQIM's operational presence in the Maghreb does not mean that the group has been completely wiped off its strategic map ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 7). It has proved to be somehow resilient. If analyzed in the short-term, AQIM can hardly be considered an existential threat in the Maghreb. Considered through al-Qaeda's own conception of time, its focus on the so-called 'long game;' its resilience and capacity to maintain a foot in the area assume a different meaning—it is perceived as essential for the group to redevelop into a more significant threat in the mid-term. AQIM's threat might be presently residual, but not wholly irrelevant.

The Current Maghrebi Modus Operandi and the Importance of the Context

Against this backdrop, it is essential to highlight a few elements, particularly in relation to Algeria and Tunisia. Observers noted that 2018 was the first year in more than two decades with no major terrorist attacks in Algeria, as the latest "relatively major" attack that hit Algeria occurred on August 31, 2017 ([Middle East Monitor](#), January 29). In that occasion, a suicide bomber killed two police officers in an attack against a police station ([Jeune Afrique](#), August 31, 2017).

However, this assessment is not correct. While it is evident that terrorist threats in Algeria have declined over the past few years, AQIM maintains a capacity to strike. For instance, on February 14, 2018, five Algerian soldiers were killed and three injured in Tébessa, north-

eastern Algeria ([Akher Saa](#), February 15, 2018; [HuffPost Maghreb](#), February 14, 2018). A few days later, on February 18, 2018, AQIM claimed responsibility for the attack through its social media channels ([Terrorism Monitor](#), March 8, 2018). If compared to the operational vitality of AQIM predecessors, or AQIM in its early years, this attack might be easily dismissed as irrelevant. However, it is still notable, for a number of reasons. In the new social and political context shaped by the current wave of protests and growing pressure on the security forces, relatively small-scale attacks against them, such as the one in February 2018, can provoke serious harm. Their impact can be amplified by the specific socio-political context in which they happen.

The current phase of uncertainty is straining Algerian security and police forces. Since June 2018, following the wide-ranging reshuffle of the security services initiated by Ahmed Gaïd Salah in the wake of the Oran scandal, pressure has increased on the security forces ([Terrorism Monitor](#), January 25). This dynamic deepened as President Bouteflika was forced to resign and many crucial actors of the security establishment, such as Mohamed "Toufik" Mediene and Athmane "Bachir" Tartag, were forced out ([HuffPost Maghreb](#), May 5).

Besides, they have to deal with the challenge represented by the protest movement. Although it has somehow lost some of its initial intensity, it remains a crucial actor in this current phase of Algerian history ([El Watan](#), June 7). Security forces are inevitably under higher pressure. They have the responsibility to manage these protests and strike a balance between repression and moderation. They must avoid causing or allowing these protests to turn into a violent threat to the state. At the same time, they also must avoid undermining the pillars of Algeria's post-independence system. The reshuffling of the past few months, the protests, and the ensuing process have all increased the sense of uncertainty in the ranks of the security forces. These factors fuel growing divisions, adding to the generational cleavages that have already emerged over the past years, as the generation who experienced Algeria's war for independence began to leave the scene.

The implication of this dynamic is that, while the attack mentioned above was not particularly significant if compared historically, the meaning of a similar attack can be very different in the current conditions. In March, AQIM urged the security forces to join the people against the regime, months after it claimed Algeria was undergoing

an identity crisis and calling for a revolution ([Jihadology](#), April 18). AQIM does not have the capacity the Algerian Islamist opposition had to dominate the narratives of discontent and organize the opposition to the regime in the late 1980s and its call to security forces will remain unheard. This demonstrates AQIM's approach and the risks it poses. AQIM attempts to identify and exploit potential cleavages and points of rupture. In the case of the security forces, it offers support that will inevitably be rejected while maintaining them as an operational target. Eventual attacks might have the double goal of undermining their capacity and their morale in a situation of increasing pressure coming from two sides—the military leadership and the protesters. Exploiting contradictions is what AQIM has been doing in Sahelian countries over the past few years. It is now trying to use this model in the Maghreb as well.

The same modus operandi is visible in Tunisia. AQIM's Tunisian affiliate, *Uqba Ibn Nafi* (UIN), failed to represent a substantial threat to the more prosperous coastal north, and its role remains confined to the mountainous areas at the border with Algeria. However, UIN continues to be active in these areas. In the past, some of its attacks in remote areas had a significant impact. For instance, the attack in Mount Chaambi in 2014—the most lethal carried out by UIN to date—did not only have a substantial effect on security, but also on broader public opinion ([Jeune Afrique](#), July 17, 2014). The latter element is increasingly crucial as Tunisia is the sole democracy in the region. The killing of security forces in terrorist attacks typically trigger significant criticism against the government and the authorities, contributing to the mounting feeling many have in Tunisia that democracy has harmed national security and the economy. Many of those working in the security forces come from poor and disadvantaged areas, and they often choose this career out of necessity rather than choice. As such, these casualties tend to reignite the latent tension existing between the people of central and southern Tunisia and the authorities. The former feel that they twice pay for this structural marginalization: first, by being forced to work in the security forces to get a salary, and then by being the victims in these attacks. In the documents UIN released in 2018, there was a significant focus on economic issues and corruption, even instrumentally using some of the documents to create a somewhat heated public debate ([Business News](#), April 10, 2018; [Espace Manager](#), May 12, 2018). This tactic is further proof of its ambitions to exploit social cleavages.

These groups are forced to operate in peripheral areas since they have been weakened over the years, as is the case of AQIM in Algeria and UIN, the latter of which never managed to establish any presence beyond these marginal areas. As such, their presence might not represent structural threats to the stability of these countries. They can, however, still create havoc by broadening social and economic cleavages. As these cleavages are set to deepen in the coming years, this peripheral jihadist threat cannot be dismissed as entirely irrelevant. It is residual but still relevant. The group's strategy is consistent with a major, operational trend that has characterized the broader action of AQIM in North and West Africa in recent years. This trend was linked to the actions and view of Jamal Oukacha, a prominent AQIM leader killed by French forces in February.

Oukacha's Legacy: 'Jihad for the Marginals'

The "head of the emirate of Timbuktu," leader of al-Qaeda in the Sahel and second in command of JNIM was killed in Mali on February 21 by French counterterrorism forces deployed in the Sahel under Operation Barkhane ([Le Monde](#), February 22). While the deaths of prominent jihadist leaders are often difficult to confirm, as the case of Amadou Kouffa has recently shown, AQIM confirmed Oukacha's death in a communique a few days later. Oukacha played a crucial role in the reorganization of the group following the death of Abou Zeid and the disruption of AQIM's networks in Northern Mali in 2013 ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 30, 2013; [MLM](#), July 31, 2013). About one year before his death, Oukacha admitted that France was successful in pushing the mujahideen out of major urban centers in Mali. This pressure allowed AQIM to develop differently. The group then worked to spread its call (*da'wa*) and strengthen relations with other communities—the Fulanis, Tuaregs, Arabs, Bambaras and Songhays—in more marginalized and peripheral areas of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. These groups responded positively to AQIM's quest for support and worked with them to defend their land and interests ([Jihadology](#), March 17, 2018).

In most cases, this support was not ideological but instrumental. The AQIM-led jihad was viewed as a tool for these communities to protect their interests, not to achieve an ideological goal. However, in al-Qaeda's plea for relevance, this aspect was secondary. AQIM takes advantage of local grievances, long-standing ethnic and racial divides, and social tensions of various kinds by

providing protection and means of support to communities that have not found the same type of support in state structures and local administrations. Meanwhile, by fostering jihad in these communities, AQIM promotes a process of *jihadist socialization* that, even if it does not bear immediate results, serves the organization's long-term strategy. In doing so, AQIM put itself at the disposal of communities or social groups and individuals that, in one way or another, feel neglected.

Conclusions

AQIM's recent strategic trajectory can shed light on the potential, future development of AQIM in the Maghreb as well. Although the socio-cultural features of the region are very different from those of the countries of the Sahel and West Africa, Maghrebi countries also have several significant cleavages that can be used to spread this jihadist message as a tool for the marginalized. Regionalism remains a crucial problem across all the countries of the Maghreb with an important socio-economic dimension. The changes that are starting to emerge as a part of the broader trend of transition affecting the entire region will likely strain several of these cleavages. In addition, there is also a creeping (re)emergence of racism—a problem often neglected—which has the potential to open new fronts of social and economic conflict ([Le Monde](#), February 24; [BusinessNews.Tn](#), August 28, 2018; [Le Point \(Afrique\)](#), June 25, 2017).

This dynamic can create new fractures and openings for AQIM. Since the economic outlook for these countries also look disappointing in the coming years, social tension will increase and new cleavages will emerge. AQIM and its Tunisian offshoot do not have the capacity to monopolize social discontent and organize political opposition, unlike what the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut*—FIS) managed in Algeria in the late 1980s and early 1990s or the Islamic Tendency Movement (*Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique*—MTI) did in Tunisia in the 1980s. AQIM, instead, wants to exploit structural and emerging contradictions in Maghrebi countries, similar to what it has done in the Sahel in recent years. As such, maintaining even a minimal operational presence to guarantee its survival in the Maghreb is functional to its long-term strategy. AQIM might not pose an immediate, crucial threat to the region compared to the intensity of the Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamique Armé*—GIA) in Algeria in the 1990s. However, its ability to maintain a presence in marginal areas and readiness to exploit socio-political cleavages

suggest it cannot merely be considered a threat of the past.

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The PKK Roots of America’s Ally in Syria

Kyle Orton

The Arab inhabitants of eastern Syria have once again turned out in protest against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Western partner force in the campaign against the Islamic State (IS). The rejection of the SDF’s rule in the area has its roots in political dynamics that were entirely foreseeable.

The SDF claims to be a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional force, and in terms of those who operate under its banner, this is true. It is equally true that the SDF’s military command structure is entirely in the hands of the People’s Protection Forces (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*—YPG), and that the political structures of the SDF are dominated overwhelmingly by the YPG’s political branch, the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*—PYD), which is in turn largely subordinate to the YPG military commanders ([Omran Center](#), January 24, 2018).

The YPG/PYD is the name used by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*—PKK) when it operates on Syrian soil ([Hurriyet](#), November 16, 2018). This has been acknowledged publicly by U.S. intelligence ([Director of National Intelligence](#), p. 21, February 13, 2018). Other Western states have documented the PKK’s habit of creating deniable branches, notably the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (*Teyrebazen Azadiye Kurdistan*—TAK) ([Australian Federal Register of Legislation](#), August 2, 2018). The PKK, an extremist organization that combined Marxism and Kurdish nationalism, is listed as a terrorist organization by the European Union, United States, and many other Western governments due to its atrocious conduct in the separatist war it has waged against Turkey since the early 1980s.

The YPG/PYD hardly makes a secret of its reverence for Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned PKK leader who has a God-like status within the PKK, despite his responsibility for crimes against humanity, many of them against Kurds ([Human Rights Watch](#), November 20, 1998). The YPG claims that it is merely inspired by Ocalan’s philosophy while having no organizational link ([Rudaw](#), January 14). This is evidently not the case ([Qasioun](#), April 21, 2018; [UK Parliament](#), February 9, 2018; [UTGAM](#), May 2017).

The anti-IS coalition is fully aware that the aid it gives formally to the SDF, and the taxes the group collects from populations under its control, are siphoned off to the PKK's historic headquarters in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq ([Twitter.com/DalatrM](https://twitter.com/DalatrM), November 24, 2018). Many intelligence agencies working on this subject have reached the same conclusion, namely that the SDF is a thin veneer for the PKK. [1]

This does not require covert sources to prove. There is abundant evidence in open sources establishing the YPG's connection to the PKK ([SETA](https://www.seta.org), April 14, 2017). The visible commander of the SDF, "General Mazlum," is a veteran PKK operative named Ferhat Abdi Shahin (Shahin Jilo), one of the most-wanted terrorists in Turkey. U.S. support for the SDF/PKK, in general, has strained relations with Turkey, and the public meetings between Mazlum/Shahin and Operation Inherent Resolve officials have proven a particular flashpoint ([Sabah](https://www.sabah.com), February 18).

The PKK is a deeply authoritarian organization, in structure and ideology.

It was under the guidance of the Soviet Union that the PKK was built into a force capable of challenging Turkey, a frontline NATO state in the Cold War. The group worked, as it usually did in liaising with terrorists, through the Assad regime and Palestinian groups. [2] The PKK drew on Lenin and Stalin as the "main, if not the only, ideological sources" for its "assumptions, beliefs, and values." [3] Hundreds of the PKK's own members have been killed over the years in Soviet-style purges for (perceived) dissidence. [4]

This ideological inheritance showed up again recently when the YPG created an Armenian unit. It displayed pictures of Armenian revolutionaries to emulate, including Monte Melkonian, one of the founders of the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), a Soviet-supported terrorist organization that killed dozens of Western citizens ([CIA](https://www.cia.gov), January 1984; [Massis Post](https://www.massispost.com), April 22).

There was some hope from the local inhabitants of areas occupied by IS, like Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, that the SDF could be more of an American project than a PKK project, and that this would ameliorate the PKK's monopolistic tendencies ([Terrorism Monitor](https://www.terrorismmonitor.com), October 19, 2018). This has not proven to be the case.

The SDF's commune system, which is supposed to create a bottom-up democratic system, has in fact been

used to administer the ideological governance of the YPG/PYD from the top-down, excluding as far as possible political opponents from the power structure. Visitors to "Rojava"—as the SDF calls the zone it holds in north-eastern Syria—found that it was a systematic policy of the SDF to curb resources and services to areas that resisted them. [5] These issues are magnified in the Arab-majority areas ([Syria Direct](https://www.syriadirect.com), August 2, 2017).

It took no great foresight to understand that this was unsustainable. By late last year, the anger in Deir Ezzor against the SDF had reached a boiling point that threatened to unravel the entire SDF structure in the area. Even those who had been willing to test out the possibility of a compact with the SDF were losing patience. [6]

It is notable that the primary trigger for what has increasingly taken on the character of a popular uprising against the SDF was the group's cordial relations with the Assad-Iran-Russia coalition, specifically the transferring of Deir Ezzor oil to keep Assad's military forces operating ([Neda'a Suriya](https://www.neda.org), April 5). Rojava has been deeply integrated with the regime coalition from the outset ([Omran Center](https://www.omrancenter.com), July 26, 2018). That the SDF has incurred no penalty for engaging in oil trade with the Assad regime, which violates the American sanctions on Assad and Iran, has helped convince many locals that their hopes in the United States exerting pressure to curb the more problematic aspects of the SDF are futile.

The implications of the short-sighted U.S. policy of solely supporting the SDF are becoming more apparent. At a geopolitical level, Russia has exploited the PKK issue to sow divisions within NATO, and the crisis in U.S.-Turkey relations is now reaching a turning point over Ankara's purchase of a Russian S-400 ([Haberler](https://www.haberler.com), June 8). On the ground, the inability of the SDF to provide legitimate local governance to Sunni Arab areas—the only viable long-term solution to defeating jihadists—threatens renewed instability that could give new life to IS.

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Notes

[1] Author interview with intelligence official, February 2019.

[2] Marcus, A. (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, pp. 54-61.

[3] Balci, A. (2017), *The PKK-Kurdistan Workers' Party's Regional Politics During and After the Cold War*, p. 112.

[4] Marcus, A. (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, pp. 91, 96, 161.

[5] Author interviews, August-September 2017.

[6] Author interviews, November 2018.

Boko Haram Factionalization: Who are Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) Fighters in Niger and Chad?

Jacob Zenn

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

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

However, ISWAP attack trends since Ba Idrisa's ascendancy to leadership in March suggest ISWAP may develop a more cooperative relationship with Shekau than the group had with him under Abu Musab al-Barnawi's leadership. As an example of this animus, after Shekau and his now deceased deputy, Man Chari, were demoted from ISWAP leadership in August 2016, they complained publicly in a video that al-Barnawi was a "polytheist" and "lacking any qualifications" (Jihadology, August 7, 2016). Abu Musab al-Barnawi and his mentor, Mamman Nur, who was formerly Muhammed Yusuf's

third-in-command, had themselves “tattle-taled” on Shekau to the Islamic State about Shekau’s violations of Abubakar al-Baghdadi’s orders on, among other matters, not “enslaving” Muslim women ([Sahara Reporters](#), August 5, 2016). On top of that, Abu Musab al-Barnawi and Nur had also cut Shekau off from communications with IS so he could not defend himself.

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

March Mayhem in Niger

ISWAP’s spate of violence in southeastern Niger under Ba Idrisa’s leadership began with two standout attacks on March 5 and 20. The first attack in N’Guagam, Diffa saw ISWAP abduct two women and the second attack in Tchoungowa, Bosso saw ISWAP abduct another four women ([Facebook.com/kakatouda.mamanegoni](#), March 20). ISWAP had previously generally abstained from abductions of women (at least if the women were Muslim) under Abu Musab al-Barnawi’s leadership, while contrarily Abubakar Shekau has never discontinued the tactic of abducting women. He reportedly has 700 abductees under his control, including several dozen of the remaining Chibok schoolgirls, who have been “married off” to fighters over their more than five years in custody ([Salkida.com](#), March 3). Meanwhile, there have been around 30 abductions in Diffa alone from January to June 2019, with women comprising more than half of the victims ([Twitter.com/rmaghrebi](#), June 13). Also worth mentioning, ISWAP besieged a base in Woulwa near Gueskerou, Diffa and killed five gendarmes on March 8 ([Actuniger](#), March 9).

The ISWAP attacks in Niger continued on March 21-22, when the group killed eight civilians in another village near Gueskerou after the new Governor of Diffa passed through the area ([Facebook.com/kakatouda.mamanegoni](#), March 22). Just days later, on March 23-24, ISWAP attacked another four villages (Alhaji-Mainari, Boula Ki-

assa, Ngagam, and Kayaa), killing 10 people and then attacked one more village (Dewa Kalguer), killing eight people ([Facebook.com/urgencediffa](#), March 25). The attacks in Niger continued again on March 26 when the group carried out its first ever “large-scale operation” in the country, this time in N’guigmi, more than 100 kilometers north of Diffa. In what was considered to be a “turning point,” ISWAP killed 14 people there, in addition to the death of a suicide bomber ([Facebook.com/urgencediffa](#), March 26). Another landmark attack occurred again on March 27, when two reported “kamikazes” attacked a gendarmerie post and killed more than 10 people in N’guigmi ([LeFigaro](#), March 27). This latter attack may have been claimed by ISWAP on April 10 as an “inghimasi (immersion by fighting until death)” operation in which the fighters were photographed in front of floral carpets before the operation.

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

For example:

- On April 26, the premises of Médecins Sans Frontières in Maine-Soroa were burned down in an attack later claimed by ISWAP ([Actuniger](#), April 26);
- On May 2, ISWAP abducted two young girls and two young boys in Toumour;
- On May 4, ISWAP killed seven people in attacks in Chetimari and Loumbouram ([Facebook.com/TOUTE-Lactualite-SUR-DIFFA](#), May 4).
- On May 24, ISWAP abducted six people (five men and a girl) near Bosso; and
- On May 29, ISWAP abducted 13 people, including a reported “three married girls” in Toumour ([Facebook](#), May 30).
- On June 4-5, ISWAP claimed to have killed more than 50 of the Niger security forces in attacks on the Diffa airport and an oil refinery, although this was likely an exaggeration.

Clearly, at least for what seem to be ISWAP members in Niger, carrying out abductions of women has become non-controversial. This tactical shift might be the result of Ba Idrisa taking over the leadership position from Abu Musab al-Barnawi. The series of kidnappings coincided with his replacing al-Barnawi in March. It should also be noted, however, that citizen-reporters in Bosso reported on March 7, that there was factional infighting between “Shekau’s faction” and “Mamman Nur’s faction” ([Facebook.com/IDI Dendi](#), March 8). The latter, of course,

refers to Abu Musab al-Barnawi's mentor, Mammam Nur, but he was purged and killed by ISWAP leadership on the orders of IS in September 2018 ([Sahara Reporters](#), September 14, 2018). This is also when al-Barnawi himself first became sidelined and put under house arrest before being dethroned by Ba Idrisa in March. One way to interpret this report about factional clashes in Bosso is that "Shekau-like" ISWAP members under Ba Idrisa's leadership—who themselves may have been former Shekau loyalists when the group was united—clashed with Abu Musab al-Barnawi loyalists, who themselves may have formerly been Mammam Nur loyalists. Whatever the nature of the clashes, it is worth taking note of the incident in the context of the leadership and tactical shifts of ISWAP in Niger at that same time.

Expanding in Chad

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

ISWAP's push northwards in Niger has also been duplicated in its operations in Chad. On June 2, for example, ISWAP reportedly killed the sultan of Bol in Chad. Previously ISWAP operations had been in and around Lake Chad itself, but Bol is much farther north of the lake than the group's previous attacks. This indicated ISWAP has, in fact, expanded its operations northwards in Chad ([Alwihda](#), June 2).

Prior to this attack, on May 25, six people and a journalist who intended to report on Chadian soldiers "to boost morale" were also killed in a roadside bomb in N'Gounboua, Chad, and on March 22, ISWAP killed 23 Chadian soldiers in Dangdallah, near Lake Chad ([Rfi.fr](#), March 22). This Dangdala attack—which was the highest death toll for Chad in any ISWAP attack and prompted Chadian President Idriss Déby to sack one of his top military officers—seems to have been claimed by ISWAP if it was referring to "Dangdallah" as "Belgarm" in a May 27 claim. However, the attacks in Bol and N'Gounboua were not formally claimed by ISWAP. Similarly, none of the abductions of women in Niger were formally

claimed by ISWAP and neither was a major attack along Lake Chad in Darak, Cameroon, where 300 fighters reportedly killed 17 soldiers and nine civilians on June 13.

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

Other Explanations for the "New" ISWAP

The ISWAP surge and expansion in Niger and Chad and the group's intensity of attacks farther north than its main area of operations in Nigeria might be attributed to the group's desire to solidify logistic and transit routes to Libya. There are, for example, reports of IS members in Libya traveling down to Nigeria and vice-versa ([GICS Report](#), April 23). There are also well-known weapon smuggling routes from Libya into Nigeria, and arms traffickers from Libya and Chad were reportedly arrested in Nigeria in June ([Punch](#), June 4). If Sudan spirals into conflict and arms proliferate, they may also end up arriving in ISWAP's hands via the black market, making logistics routes through Niger and Chad all the more important for the group.

ISWAP may also recognize that Niger is increasingly becoming a sought after country by both French and U.S. forces as a base for operations targeting ISWAP in Nigeria and Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS)—whose attacks are now being claimed by ISWAP—and al-Qaeda-aligned jihadists in Mali. Therefore, ISWAP seeks to weaken, demoralize, or neutralize Niger ([The Nation](#), January 9).

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

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

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

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Notes:

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