

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## THE SHIFTING POWER OF AL-QAEDA'S AFFILIATES

*Brian M. Perkins*

Several significant developments with broad implications for al-Qaeda and its global affiliates have taken place since early 2019. Leadership losses and changing conflict dynamics have led to a notable reshuffling in terms of the strength and preeminence of its individual affiliates from the Middle East to Africa. The organization as a whole, however, remains remarkably resilient and further opportunities to regroup remain on the horizon. Core al-Qaeda could look to lean into this reshuffling by bolstering its ties and coordination with its looser affiliates.

Arguably the best news for al-Qaeda is the peace deal between the United States and the Taliban. At present, it is unclear how the implementation of the deal will play out, but if the dozens of attacks since its signing are any indication, the security environment is not likely to drastically improve ([Al Jazeera](#), March 20). Core al-Qaeda has, of course, taken note of the deal and released a three-page statement lauding the Taliban's victory over the United States and calling for Afghans and

mujahideen to strengthen the Taliban regime. The statement did not portend a Taliban-

al-Qaeda split as the peace deal calls for, further suggesting the two are likely to maintain their mutually beneficial relationship in Afghanistan. The possibility of a greater al-Qaeda return if the situation backslides is present.

Outside of core al-Qaeda's historical stronghold, many of its affiliates have undergone significant changes that have started to shift the balance of power away from its Middle East-based groups and could lead its general command to reorient itself toward its more peripheral affiliates.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which was long considered al-Qaeda's most powerful branch—and the closest to the center—has experienced operational limitations due to the complexity of the conflict in Yemen and has been further undermined by significant leadership losses, including the death of Qassim al-Rimi in a U.S. airstrike ([Al Jazeera](#), February 23). AQAP may still be al-Qaeda's favorite son, but it is seemingly no longer the most dominant al-Qaeda affiliate, being overtaken by affiliates that do not bear the al-Qaeda name.

## IMPLICATIONS OF IRGC'S PERCEIVED TRANSMISSION OF CORONAVIRUS

*Brian M. Perkins*

Syria has not officially recorded a confirmed case of coronavirus, largely due to a lack of health infrastructure and government denial/silence on the matter, but human rights and health observers have noted outbreaks in areas under Syrian government control in Tartous, Damascus, Homs, and Latakia provinces, as well as rumors of cases in areas outside government control ([Al Jazeera](#), March 16). The Syrian regime relies heavily on Iranian support and reports have begun to emerge linking Iranian officials and fighters to cases of the coronavirus. While the link between IRGC officials or Iranian proxy forces and coronavirus cases cannot be independently verified, it is still likely cases have originated in Iran as the Syrian government was slow to halt flights between its country and Iran following the outbreak. Iran plays an active role in the Syrian government's military operations.

Outside of Syria, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and its proxies have similarly been linked to coronavirus cases in Lebanon and Iraq. Continued flights by the IRGC-linked Mahan Air as well as the coronavirus-related deaths of at least six IRGC members, including Lt. General Nasser Sha'abani lends some credence to the notion of the IRGC as a transmission vector as its officials travel to liaise with its proxies and fighters rotate back from Iran ([Al Arabiya](#), March 13). Regardless, the rumors themselves and the more easily confirmed transmission of cases from Iran in general does have significant short term and long-term implications for Iranian proxies.

In the short-term, significant coronavirus outbreaks in countries where Iran maintains proxy forces could alter their abilities to operate as well as the local government and international community's operations against Iran and its proxy forces. For instance, President Trump reportedly held off on an aggressive response against Iran for attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq and is drawing down some operations in the country due to the coronavirus outbreak.

In the long-term, the pandemic is likely to alter the economic and political environment in a way that challenges the authority of many Iranian proxies, particularly Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Lebanese economy is in dire

In Iraq and Syria, the ascendance of Islamic State (IS) and subsequent fractures among jihadist factions led to a significant loss of al-Qaeda influence. The growth of the affiliate organization Hurras al-Din helped regain some of al-Qaeda's influence in Syria, but the group is now faced with new challenges posed by the confrontations between Turkey and Russia and the fragile ceasefire in Idlib ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), March 20).

While al-Qaeda's affiliates in the Middle East are facing substantial challenges and are seemingly primed for a notable decline in their operational capabilities, its affiliates in Africa have grown or remained strong.

Al-Qaeda's Sahelian branch, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), grew increasingly powerful over 2019 and has wreaked havoc on Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Meanwhile, al-Shabaab remains strong and has conducted a series of high-profile attacks—both in Somalia and Kenya—in recent months, including a deadly attack on the Manda Bay Airfield in Kenya that killed three Americans ([Garowe Online](#), January 25). The group's rate of attacks and number of civilian casualties surged in 2019 and there is little sign of a slowdown, garnering regular praise from al-Qaeda's general command. While JNIM and al-Shabaab may not bear the al-Qaeda name in the way AQAP does, they remain firmly within the al-Qaeda milieu and have both followed attacks with statements indicating they were in accordance with Ayman al-Zawahiri's wishes and overarching strategy.

AQAP's decline and the impending challenges faced by Hurras al-Din have resulted in al-Qaeda's African affiliates becoming the organization's preeminent groups in terms of strength and effectiveness. Meanwhile, the shifting security landscape in al-Qaeda's historical stronghold of Afghanistan will at best maintain the status quo and at worst could see al-Qaeda further rebuild under Taliban cover. As al-Qaeda's once powerful affiliate in Yemen wanes, the group's general command will likely seek to reposition its other affiliates by attempting to draw them closer to the center and placing further emphasis on their operations under the al-Qaeda umbrella. Core al-Qaeda will make every effort to help rebuild and keep AQAP afloat and maintain influence in Syria through Hurras al-Din, but could reprioritize the groups that have found more success in recent years.

*Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.*

condition and the outbreak has laid bare systemic issues that could provide the Lebanese government an opportunity to increase its legitimacy at the detriment of Hezbollah, which runs the country's health ministry. Further, the outbreak is being increasingly politicized—from within and outside Lebanon—as Hezbollah opponents blame the outbreak on the group's close relationship with Iran. Rumors were also circulated that Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and other leaders were infected following meetings with Iranian officials ([Jerusalem Post](#), March 11). The outbreak has the potential to bolster anti-Hezbollah/Iran sentiment while offering the government a chance to intervene in a positive way.

Iran is undoubtedly the Middle East's epicenter of the pandemic, which is likely to have significant implications on the region's political landscape and Iranian proxies. Regardless of whether the IRGC is in fact a notable transmission vector, rumors and the perception that it is coupled with the economic impacts of the outbreak create conditions that can pose a significant challenge to Iranian proxies' authority. While the peak reaction in many countries will likely not come until the outbreak subsides, protests against Iranian-backed militias have continued in Iraq despite coronavirus, with protesters calling the militias the virus.

*Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.*

## The Houthis' War to Lose: The Battle for Marib

*Michael Horton*

Yemen's Houthis have defied the forecasts of numerous analysts who predicted that their grip on northwest Yemen would erode. Rather than being weakened, Houthi and allied forces are stronger and better organized than at any point over the last two years. The Houthis' recent offensives in the Yemeni governorates of al-Jawf and, now, Marib attest to their continued strength as a cohesive fighting force.

On March 1, Houthi and allied forces seized al-Hazm, the capital of the governorate of al-Jawf. Following the capture of al-Hazm, Houthi and allied forces expanded their offensive and have seemingly retaken most of al-Jawf ([Middle East Monitor](#), March 2). The capture of al-Jawf, which borders Saudi Arabia, will allow the Houthis to push deeper into the energy-rich governorate of Marib ([al-Monitor](#), March 12). Marib is a critical stronghold for the Saudi-backed government of Abd Raboo Mansur Hadi. Control of Marib, or even just parts of it, will not only give the Houthis control of key oil and gas resources, but will also curtail Saudi-backed forces' ability to attack Houthi positions. Marib city, the capital of the governorate, is home to air and military bases used by Hadi-aligned forces. Without access to these bases, Hadi-aligned forces' ability to operate in Yemen will be seriously impeded. Marib is also home to tens of thousands of IDPs.

The Houthis advance in al-Jawf and Marib builds on their longstanding strategy of consolidate, hold, and advance. While there have been numerous tactical setbacks over the last year, the Houthis and allied forces have maintained their ability to launch effective and deadly counter-offensives. This was demonstrated in the district of Nihm, which borders the Houthi-held capital of Sana'a. In late January, the Houthis launched a counter-offensive that retook those areas that had been captured by Hadi-allied forces ([al-Monitor](#), February 19). Once they reestablished control, the Houthis used parts of Nihm as a base from which to target Hadi allied forces in al-Jawf.

While the forces who oppose the Houthis possess more advanced weapons, and in theory, air support from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), they do

not have a coherent chain of command or effective leadership on the battlefields. [1] Additionally, the Hadi-aligned forces struggle with legitimacy and the maintenance of critical tribal support. In contrast, the Houthis and their allies—which include a significant and growing percentage of the critical “collar tribes” that ring Sana’a—have clear chains of command and broad tribal support. This support is not indicative of support for the “Houthi movement.” It is more likely that this support reflects tribal elites betting on those forces they think will win. This support is also based on the Houthis’ ability to successfully buy and coerce the support of key tribal power brokers.

Just as Yemen’s former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, did, the Houthis apply a carrot and stick approach to gain and maintain tribal support. Tribal and political elites who support the Houthis are included in the lucrative legal and illegal trade in gasoline, propane, food, and medical supplies. Those who support them are also incorporated—to a limited degree—into the Sana’a-based government. Elites who do not support the Houthis are subject to kidnapping, harassment, prosecution, and assassination ([Arab News](#), March 4). The Houthis are increasingly heavy-handed in those areas that they control. However, at least for now, they seem to understand what Ali Abdullah Saleh long understood: there are lines that are not to be crossed without consequences. The de-facto sovereignty of tribal elites is generally respected in those areas that they govern.

In contrast, the Hadi-aligned government in exile has struggled with both legitimacy and with gaining consistent support from key tribal elites based in northwest Yemen. Even in Marib, the Hadi-backed forces are finding it difficult to maintain support. This is despite the fact that Saudi Arabia has flooded the governorate with money—money that has turned Marib into something of a boomtown. Marib-based tribal elites are politically and tactically sophisticated and have a long history of outmaneuvering outsiders. If the Houthis and their allies manage to make significant headway in Marib, there may be a sudden and dramatic shift in alliances. The Houthis are just as politically adept and will undoubtedly make promises that will interest Marib’s elites more than a protracted battle.

The forces opposing the Houthis in Marib are largely composed of men brought in from other governorates around Yemen. They are poorly paid, organized, and led, but most critically, they are outsiders. The web of

alliances and loyalties in Marib will disintegrate if it comes under sustained pressure from a Houthi advance. Even with air support, it is unlikely that these forces will be able to hold all of Marib. Without its base in Marib, the Saudi-backed Hadi alliance will become more irrelevant than it already is to the unfolding wars in Yemen.

For months, Saudi Arabia has been scaling down the funding of its war in Yemen. Given the plummeting oil price, a global pandemic, and the unfolding financial crisis, the Kingdom and the UAE will likely begin re-evaluating their expensive and counter-productive policies in Yemen. The only thing likely to stop the Houthis from retaking most, if not all, of northwest Yemen is their own hubris. In Sana’a and in other areas, there is mounting evidence that the Houthis are becoming ever more oppressive and extractive. However, for now, the Houthis and their allies remain the most cohesive and militarily capable force in Yemen. It is their war to lose.

*Michael Horton is a Fellow for Arabian affairs at the Jamestown Foundation.*

## Notes

[1] The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and those forces they back have struggled to establish coherent and effective chains of command across areas of operation since their interventions began in March 2015. See: <https://ctc.usma.edu/can-uae-security-forces-avoid-wrong-turn-yemen/>

# Terrorist Threat as a Pre-Text: Russia Strengthens Ties with G5 Sahel

*Sergey Sukhankin*

## Introduction

Following the 1991 dissolution of the USSR—which maintained diplomatic relations with 46 African countries in the mid-1980s—the Russian Federation lost a large part of the Soviet influence on the continent. Beginning in the mid-2000s, however, Russia’s regional policy started to change, and the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis solidified Russia’s resolve to pursue opportunities in Sub-Saharan Africa ([RussianCouncil.ru](http://RussianCouncil.ru), February 20). A truly pivotal event that demonstrated Russia’s determination was the Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum, held in Sochi on October 23–24, 2019 (see [EDM](http://EDM), October 28, 2019). Given Russia’s relative economic weakness, one of the very few competitive advantages at the Kremlin’s disposal is military-technical cooperation.

## Terrorism in the G5 Sahel and Russia’s Position

Poverty, rampant corruption, and political instability have contributed to increasing radicalization of youth in Sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, some areas of the region have become a safe haven for groups/movements of fundamentalist orientation ([Vz.ru](http://Vz.ru), October 25, 2017). Arguably, the most challenging situation is faced by the G5 Sahel (formed in 2014), which consists of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger—countries threatened by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), al-Mourabitoun, Boko Haram, and others. The situation is profoundly complicated by differing approaches promulgated by larger players, including the EU, United States, Russia, and China, as well as meager results from international assistance in the fight against terrorism ([Lemonde.fr](http://Lemonde.fr), June 16, 2017).

Regional security became one of the key topics discussed before and during the Russia-Africa Summit. Specifically, the Permanent Secretary of the G5 Sahel, Maman Sambo Sidikou, expressed his hope that Russia would be involved at a certain point, since “the region is unable to deal with this [terrorism] on its own” ([Vpk.-](http://Vpk.-)

[name](http://name), October 25, 2019). Russia made the issue of security one of the focal points prior to the event. In his speech, President Putin emphasized that Russia is determined to broaden cooperation with African countries in the realm of security, including in the “[F]ight against terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, money laundering, illegal migration and piracy.” On the other hand, Putin emphasized that African countries need Russia’s involvement since “some of its countries are unable to deal with militants and require support... Russia is developing military-technical cooperation to help African countries to protect their independence and sovereignty” ([Ren.tv](http://Ren.tv), October 20, 2019). To stress his point, Putin stated that “[W]e are proud that we in Russia have created an effective security system and, what is more important, effective up-to-date armed forces... we are spending three percent of [GDP] on war expenditure and there is a trend toward further reduction.” He also noted that African countries are spending an “unbearable amount of money on security-related issues and fighting organized crime” implying that Russia could share with them its experience ([Rg.ru](http://Rg.ru), October 24, 2019).

This opinion is shared and actively promoted by leading Russian Africanists, such as former ambassador to Mali and Niger Yevgeny Korendiasov (now at the Institute of Africa at the Russian Academy of Science). Korendiasov said that despite the significant economic transformations experienced by the majority of African countries, they remain ill-prepared for global threats such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and other types of criminal activities, implying that they need experienced partners ([Politexpert.net](http://Politexpert.net), March 21, 2018). Most importantly, the Russian side—while referring to problems faced by countries from G5 Sahel—never misses a chance to criticize the supposed ineffectiveness of international missions in general, and specifically the French armed forces, in their counterterrorist operations as well as “the arduous legacy of the colonial past.” In his assessment of factors hindering African development, it is quite interesting that Putin identified such factors as “terrorism, extremist ideology, piracy and consequences of [the] so-called Arab Spring,” suggesting that the blame should be put on the West (in Russian discourse, a force that provoked developments on the Middle East) and implied that only Russia (as a country that reportedly achieved huge success in the fight against international terrorism) is capable of providing necessary training to African nations ([Ria.ru](http://Ria.ru), October 24, 2019).

## Military-Technical Cooperation: First Steps and Future Prospects

By the end of 2018, Russia signed at least 19 military-technical cooperation agreements with countries in sub-Saharan Africa ([Rueconomics.ru](http://Rueconomics.ru), October 17, 2018). The year 2019 brought several new developments pertaining to the G5 Sahel. Specifically, Russia took its first steps in strengthening military-technical cooperation with one of the most endangered players in the region—Mali—a country that used to be a staunch ally of the USSR during the Cold War period. On July 26, ministers of defense of both countries signed an agreement (during the Army-2019 military forum) on strengthening cooperation in the realm of military affairs and security. The security situation in Mali is aggravated by the activities of radical Islamic fundamentalists on the one hand, and a severe rivalry between three main ethnic groups—Fulani, Tuaregs, and Dogons. In terms of the military-political environment, the situation in Mali is similar, to some extent, to the Central African Republic (CAR), where Russians, both official military instructors and members of the Wagner Group PMC, have been operating for some time with reported success ([Geo-politica.info](http://Geo-politica.info), July 15, 2019). Some Russian experts have argued that in the near future a military agreement between Mali and Russia (following the example of the CAR) might be signed ([Rueconomics.ru](http://Rueconomics.ru), July 2, 2019).

From a tactical point of view, potential Russian success in Mali could be instrumental in its endeavors in other G5 Sahel countries, specifically in Chad, which has been experiencing a wave of terrorist attacks ([Ria.ru](http://Ria.ru), January 28). One of Russia's key diplomats for the Middle East and Africa, Mikhail Bogdanov, had previously met with representatives of Chad to discuss some (undeclared) details related to potential military-technical cooperation between Russia and Chad—one of the active players in the Libyan civil war and a country endowed with oil reserves ([Ria.ru](http://Ria.ru), April 29, 2019). From a strategic point of view, Russia's involvement in the Sahel zone could signify a new stage in cooperation with China in Africa. Prominent United Congolese Party figure, Christian Malanga, described this cooperation as "China – the money, Russia – muscles" ([Gazeta.ru](http://Gazeta.ru), May 23, 2019).

*Dr. Sergey Sukhankin is a Fellow at the Jamestown Foundation and an Associate Expert at the International Center for Policy Studies (Kyiv).*

## Islamic State in West Africa Province and the Battle With Boko Haram

*Jacob Zenn*

Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), like other jihadist groups, is prone to internal leadership purges. After pledging loyalty to Abubakar al-Baghdadi and joining Islamic State (IS) in March 2015, ISWAP's hardline leader, Abubakar Shekau, was ejected from the group in August 2016. IS then announced the more moderate Abu Musab al-Barnawi as ISWAP's leader ([Al-Naba #41](http://Al-Naba #41), August 2, 2016). In March 2019, however, another relative moderate known as Ba Idrisa became ISWAP leader and al-Barnawi was demoted to *shura* (consultative council) member ([Vanguard](http://Vanguard), March 16, 2019). This all occurred after al-Barnawi's main backer, Mamman Nur was purged in late 2018. Nur was a deputy of al-Barnawi's father, Boko Haram co-founder Muhammed Yusuf ([Sahara Reporters](http://Sahara Reporters), September 14, 2018).

ISWAP never explained why Abu Musab al-Barnawi was demoted, nor did IS comment on his demotion. However, the demotion coincided with IS' organizational restructuring in Africa. ISWAP, for example, incorporated Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) in March 2019 and IS announced its new Central Africa Province in April 2019. The former comprised Sahel-based jihadists and the latter comprises jihadists in northern Mozambique and eastern Congo ([Al-Jazeera](http://Al-Jazeera), April 19, 2019). Abu Musab Al-Barnawi's record of neutrality regarding the IS-al-Qaeda rivalry may have been one of his liabilities and a cause for his demotion ([al-Haqaiq](http://al-Haqaiq), August 5, 2018).

Most recently, in February-March, Ba Idrisa was purged amid widespread internal conflict among ISWAP leaders. It is unclear whether Ba Idrisa or al-Barnawi are still alive after the infighting, while other pro-IS hardline ISWAP leaders, including Mustapha Kirmimma, may also have been killed or injured. Two ISWAP leaders, previously unknown to outsiders, have reportedly been elevated to ISWAP's leadership ranks ([Premium Times](http://Premium Times), March 3).

Despite this turmoil, ISWAP has maintained unfettered communication lines to IS. Since the infighting began in February, ISWAP has, for example, released photos of elder ISWAP fighters with white beards executing five

Christians wearing orange, prison-style jumpsuits. [1] This came several weeks after an ISWAP child soldier similarly executed a Christian wearing a similar outfit. In addition, ISWAP released through IS' Amaq media agency its executions of Nigerian soldiers captured in Baga in March. [2] The Lake Chad shoreline town of Baga has been a key battleground since February, when Nigeria began attempts to fully recapture it from ISWAP. IS also highlighted Baga in its *al-Naba* magazine in March by interviewing an ISWAP commander about the series of battles there. [3]

### The Shekau Faction's Challenge to ISWAP

Although ISWAP's internal feuds have inevitably inhibited some operations, the group has continued attacks in Nigeria, including in southern Borno, northern Yobe, and around Lake Chad, but also in Chetimari and elsewhere in southeastern Niger ([Aniamey.com](#), March 9). Nevertheless, one question that arises is where Abubakar Shekau stands in view of ISWAP's leadership purges.

Although Shekau was removed from ISWAP leadership in August 2016, he never renounced loyalty to IS and still views his faction, which is called Jamaat Ahlussunnah lid-Dawa wal-Jihad, as somehow connected to IS. Prior to ISWAP's February-March 2020 leadership purges, Shekau's faction had also been encroaching on ISWAP's core areas of operations around Lake Chad. His faction, for example, claimed attacks in towns where ISWAP also operates, such as Bama, Banki, Ngom, Tun-gunshe, Maiduguri (Muna Garage), and "on Lake Chad" itself. [4]

The Shekau faction's Lake Chad-based sub-faction led by Bakura (only known by one name) had also claimed attacks in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, as well as the aforementioned Maiduguri attack (See [TM](#), January 28). [5] Bakura's sub-faction was also more likely than the Shekau faction to have been responsible for kidnapping Chadian medics in late 2019 just north of Lake Chad in Chad. The medics were later featured in a Shekau faction proof-of-life video in February. [6] Nevertheless, the Nigerian and Nigerien militaries claim they killed Bakura along the Nigeria-Niger border in March ([Daily Post](#), March 13; [Lemonde](#), March 20). If true, this means his widespread harassment of civilians, if not also rival ISWAP fighters, in that area may come to an end, but ISWAP or Bakura's deputies may fill the operational void he has left behind.

Besides the Nigeria-Niger border area, ISWAP has moved brigades toward Shekau's main bases in Sambisa Forest, Borno State, Nigeria, including for launching February and March attacks in Garkida, northern Adamawa, where ISWAP destroyed churches, and Damboa, southern Borno ([Vanguard](#), March 4; [Punch](#), March 6). The two rival groups—ISWAP and Shekau's faction—are overlapping now more than at any point since August 2016 and their proximity obviously presents opportunities for them to clash, which has been occurring. It also means presents the groups potential opportunities to collaborate ([Twitter.com/l\\_boukar](#), March 11). The collaboration could be bolstered by some ISWAP hardliners formerly loyal to Shekau that still hold similar ideologies. ISWAP leadership also acknowledged the factionalization that Shekau has been causing in its most recent February video. [7] ISWAP is, at the least, concerned about the negative effects Shekau continues to have on ISWAP's unity at a time that its leadership is itself engaged in infighting.

### Shekau Anti-Shura Leadership Style

Shekau's faction also has different leadership mechanisms than ISWAP, which makes his leadership over his faction safer than any leader's "job security" in the rival group. Shekau is the undisputed and unquestioned leader of his faction and has historically dissolved his *shura* and killed anyone who advised or criticized him ([al-Andalus](#), September 15, 2018). While this was one reason why ISWAP abandoned him in August 2016, it has also meant Shekau remains secure in his factional leadership position.

In contrast, ISWAP after August 2016 introduced a form of "democracy" to its leadership through its *shura*, which resulted in Mamman Nur's purging, Abu Musab al-Barnawi's demotion, Ba Idrisa's ejection, and other leaders being killed. One advantage Shekau has over ISWAP's newest leaders, for all his faults, is name recognition. Moreover, since Shekau's ideology has remained unchanged and he has consistently been releasing videos since August 2016, Nigerian jihadists know where he stands on issues of *takfir*, slavery, negotiation with the Nigerian government, targeting Christians and Muslim 'apostates', as well as his physical appearance and jihadist credentials.

ISWAP's newest leaders, however, may be well-known only to high-level commanders in the group and not necessarily to the masses of foot soldiers. This does not indicate Shekau will return to ISWAP leadership. It

could, however, lead to some foot soldiers siding with Shekau's faction and the "devil they know" rather than ISWAP's newest leaders when choosing which side to join or support.

### Macro X-Factors Ahead

At this time when ISWAP and Shekau's faction are competing, clashing, and overlapping in each other's areas of operations and the lone al-Qaeda-loyal Nigerian faction, Ansaru, is accelerating its attacks and banditry in northwestern Nigeria, the global landscape is under stress ([The Cable](#), February 9). Although France upgraded its operations in the Sahel to combat ISGS (which is technically ISWAP since March 2019) in January, Paris may not be able to focus on the Sahel as much as it did weeks ago while it now also combats the coronavirus pandemic domestically. Similarly, the United States was apparently dissuaded from reducing troops in the Sahel in February. The United States is also now facing the coronavirus pandemic in multiple cities and potentially an economic recession. As such, the Sahel is, if anything, likely to become more of a backburner issue in U.S. foreign policy discourses.

Meanwhile, the Afghan Taliban's favorable negotiation tactic with the United States focuses not only on prisoner releases, but also on an eventual withdrawal from Afghanistan. This has now become the model for the Mali-based al-Qaeda-loyal group, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) ([Maliweb.net](#), March 10). JNIM, for example, is now making similar demands to the Malian government for negotiations to occur, focusing on French withdrawal from Mali.

A bright side for Sahelian countries and Nigeria has been that the world's most significant catastrophe, coronavirus, is yet to severely affect them, despite indications in recent days of rising infections in multiple African countries, including Nigeria. However, the West's internal health and economic concerns, compounded by the U.S. inability to subdue the Taliban, presents opportunities and a morale boost for jihadists in the Sahel and Nigeria. Therefore, if Sahelian countries and Nigeria could have ever counted on France or the United States to decisively support them in their battles against JNIM, ISWAP (including ISGS) or Shekau's faction, now any such assurance has become less clear than ever.

*Jacob Zenn is a Senior Fellow focusing on African and Central Asian affairs at The Jamestown Foundation. He tweets at @Bokowatch.*

### Notes

[1] The disturbing image from March 8, 2020 is available at the author's book-related website: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/08/06/iswap-photostreams-2015-onwards/>

[2] The disturbing videos from January 17, 2020 and March 10, 2020 are available at the author's book-related website: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/04/11/iswap-amaq-video-of-liquidation-of-supporters-of-nigeria-april-2-2019/>

[3] The Al-Naba #225 article from March 13, 2020 that featured the interview on Page 6: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/05/14/alnaba179180190198201205/>

[4] The attack claims are available at the author's book-related website: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/05/19/boko-haram-plagiarizing-iswap-claims-2018/>

[5] The September 24, 2019 Bakura sub-faction video is available at: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/09/24/boko-haram-abubakar-shekau-message-of-glad-tidings-and-advice-to-my-brothers-in-allah-in-lake-chad-september-23-2019/>

[6] The proof-of-life video is available at the author's book-related website: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2020/02/28/boko-haram-three-kidnapped-chadian-medics-video-february-27-2020/>