

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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WHAT WILL COME OF UZBEK AND CENTRAL ASIAN MILITANT GROUPS FIGHTING ALONGSIDE THE TALIBAN?

Brian Perkins

As the United States has worked to finalize the peace deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan, persistent questions have lingered as to the degree to which the insurgency as a whole will adhere to the terms agreed upon by the pro-peace contingent of the organization that has been involved in the talks. Concerns have also arisen as to whether or not the Taliban will cut ties with its al-Qaeda counterparts, as well as Pakistani fighters belonging to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and other Pakistani militant groups that have sought refuge in Afghanistan to escape Pakistani military operations. Another key question, however, is what will become of the Uzbek and Tajik groups that have fought under the Taliban banner for years, some of which have redirected fighters from Syria to Afghanistan in recent years.

The three primary militant groups that are comprised predominantly of Uzbeks and Tajiks operating in Afghanistan are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), and Khatiba Imam al-

Bukhari (KIB). The IJU and KIB split from the IMU in the early 2000s and 2011, respectively. The IMU was one of the longest standing Central Asian terrorist groups, but has become all but defunct due to the breaking away of IJU and KIB. Many IMU members also aligned with Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), a move that drew quick hostility from its long time Taliban partners.

IJU and KIB have primarily fought under the auspices of the Taliban since their respective founding, but also have active contingents in Syria that have fought alongside the various permutations of al-Qaeda-linked groups there, including al-Nusra Front and, more recently, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) ([UN](#), July 15, 2019). KIB played a prominent role in the takeover of Idlib in 2015. KIB and IJU still have active fighters in Syria, but many others have reportedly returned to Afghanistan since 2018. Both groups' Afghan branches have allegedly conducted joint operations with the Taliban during this time, though the KIB's most recent alleged joint operation has been denied by the Taliban ([Tolo News](#), July 9).

While the IMU is largely defunct and the relationship with the Taliban has been severely damaged by defections to IS-K, both IJU and KIB remain within the larger Taliban umbrella. The Taliban, for its part of the peace

deal, has agreed to sever ties with foreign terrorist groups. Although it is unclear if the group will follow through, KIB and IJU may view the peace deal as a major hinderance to their overall objectives in the region. In the event that the Taliban breaks support or IJU and KIB determine Afghanistan is no longer their best haven, it is likely that more fighters will attempt to link up with the Uzbek and Central Asian contingents fighting in Syria or that others will attempt to infiltrate their countries of origin, a task that has so far proven particularly challenging. The contingents left in Afghanistan are unlikely large enough to drastically alter the tide in Syria, but they would provide a force multiplier and could redirect aspiring Uzbek fighters who might otherwise have travelled to Afghanistan.

Brian Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

CHALLENGES OF EGYPT'S MILITARY STRATEGY IN SINAI

Brian Perkins

Egyptian security forces have largely managed to eradicate terrorist groups that once plagued the country and have mostly prevented Islamic State (IS) affiliated fighters from infiltrating the country's mainland from the Sinai Peninsula. However, Islamic State-Sinai Province (IS-SP) remains active and the Egyptian military's strategy of containment will continue to prove costly from multiple perspectives.

IS-SP has only managed to launch attacks on the country's mainland intermittently over the past several years, but the group remains significantly active across a large portion of territory stretching from close to the Suez Canal in the west to near the Gaza border to the east. This year, however, has seen a notable increase in attacks near Bir al-Abd, along the peninsula's northern coast routes to the Suez Canal.

The nearly 100 attacks claimed by IS-SP since the beginning of 2020 have highlighted the group's continued capabilities and the challenges faced by the Egyptian armed forces, despite the Egyptian forces' regular claims of successful operations against the militants.

Among the most significant and costly challenges are the disconnect between the military command in Cairo and the field commanders from the 2nd and 3rd Field Armies responsible for the operations on the ground in Sinai, and the largely reactive nature of military operations. Most recently, on July 21, the government claimed to have killed 18 IS-SP fighters and destroyed several explosive devices after the group launched an attack on a military outpost in Bir al-Abd that killed two Egyptian soldiers. IS-SP, however, claimed the operation killed 100 Egyptian military personnel. Many similar claims of operational successes and the death of IS-SP fighters follow the same pattern in which IS-SP conducts an attack that prompts retaliatory operations by Egyptian forces, with significant disparities between casualty claims.

This reactive containment strategy has allowed the group significant freedom of movement and has contributed to the frequent loss of Egyptian soldiers, including senior military officers such as Lieutenant Colonel Ahmad Shahata Abd al-Maqoud and Brigadier General

Mostafa Abido, who were killed by bombings in February near Sheikh Zuweid and Bir al-Abd, respectively ([al-Araby](#), February 25).

Meanwhile, the Egyptian armed forces' lack of a full-scale military operation since Comprehensive Operation Sinai in 2018 and failure to engage in a more holistic approach has led them to increasingly rely on the Sinai Tribal Union—which includes the Tarabin and Sawarka tribes, among others—to provide some of the more proactive measures to combat IS-SP. These measures include a deal that incentivizes tribal elders to turn in tribal members who are fighting alongside IS-SP in exchange for those members' amnesty upon interrogation by Egyptian officials ([Al-Monitor](#), June 16). This reliance on the Sinai Tribal Union has increasingly led to kidnappings and violent attacks on tribal members and civilians, including an attack on the Abou Tawila village just east of the town of Sheikh Zuwayed that killed three Tarabin tribe members on July 6 ([Mada Masr](#), July 15).

The strategy of containment, the reactive nature of military operations, and a lack of flexibility for field commanders will continue to provide IS-SP with the operational space needed to wage a prolonged insurgency, despite more concerted attempts to cut off its supply, finance, and recruitment lines. The reliance on local tribes—while important to stem recruitment, gain vital intelligence and provide more persistent armed resistance—will increasingly lead to attacks on civilians and could disincentivize future cooperation if the government does not fulfill its role in providing more effective security.

Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Pakistan Confronts Resurgent Baluch Ethno-Separatist Militancy

Animesh Roul

Pakistan has recently faced a renewed ethno-separatist militant surge targeting its financial and energy infrastructure. Four recent attacks indicate a resurgence within the multiple secessionist groups fighting for Baluchistan independence.

On June 29, the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), a banned ethno-separatist militant group, claimed a *fi-dayeen* (suicide) attack on the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX), in the port city of Karachi. Eleven people died, including four heavily armed BLA militants who attempted to storm the PSX building. Subsequently, the BLA's suicide squad, the Majeed Brigade—named after the deceased, would-be assassin of former Prime Minister Zulfikar Bhutto, Abdul Majeed Baloch—claimed responsibility for the attack through its media unit 'Hakkal' ([Telegram](#), June 30; see [TM](#), January 25, 2019). Images of slain militants and threats of future operations surfaced on social media platforms, including through Hakkal's dedicated Telegram and Twitter handles.

A week later, on July 5, the BLA again staged multiple attacks targeting security checkpoints belonging to the Levies Force and Frontier Corps, along with a coal mine in Zard Aloo and Chappar Lat area of Hernai in the restive Baluchistan province. BLA claimed responsibility for all three attacks through its spokesman Jeeyand Baloch ([Telegram](#), July 5). On July 14, another Baluch militant organization, the Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF) claimed responsibility for an ambush on a military convoy in the Kahan area of Panjgur district in Baluchistan, killing three soldiers and injuring several others ([Dawn](#), July 14). BLF spokesman Gwahram Baloch, however, exaggerated the damage, stating that more than 20 security personnel were killed in that assault in a statement later released by the group.

The U.S. Department of State designated the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) as a Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs) under Executive Order (E.O.) 13224, in July 2019. [1] Pakistan, which imposed a ban on the BLA in 2006, hailed the U.S. designation, as the move limits the groups' funding lifelines.

The BLA and BLF are the oldest and most violent Baluch militant organizations active in the country. However, there are several new armed splinter groups such as the United Baluch Army (UBA), Baluch Republican Guard (BRG), Lashkar-e-Baluchistan, and Baluch Republican Army (BRA) have emerged and joined the insurgency. Baluch Raji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS), a militant conglomeration, was established in late 2018 with a purpose to consolidate the factionalized Baluch separatist movement and to orchestrate concerted attacks against Pakistani security forces and Chinese targets, especially on infrastructure projects associated with the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). BRAS registered its first major attack on April 18, 2019, when its militants killed 14 people in the remote Ormara area of Baluchistan ([Al Jazeera](#), April 18, 2019). Like BLA and BRAS, the UBA was also in the limelight this year when its militants targeted a security convoy of an oil and gas exploration company at Peer-Ghaib in Bolan on May 18, killing six Frontier Corps personnel ([The News](#), May 19; [Dawn](#), May 20).

Pakistan often accuses Indian and Iranian intelligence agencies of supporting Baluch militants. Following the PSX violence, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, named India as a co-conspirator behind the Karachi terrorist attack. Pakistan often perceives Indian or Iranian involvement when the indigenous militant groups unleash violence against state infrastructure and challenge Pakistan's authority. However, investigations into the PSX attack case traced the alleged facilitators and located their handler's location to Kandahar city in Afghanistan ([The News](#), July 1).

These unverifiable accusations against India and/or Iran notwithstanding, Pakistan has successfully diluted and subdued the Baluch independence movement over the years through extrajudicial means and exploited the ideological and operational cleavages between self-exiled Baluch separatist (often termed as nationalist) leaders abroad, such as Hyrbyair Marri and Brahamdagh Bugti, and militant commanders on the ground. However, broader aims and objectives to carve out an independent Baluchistan remain intact among the resurgent armed formations. Influential militant leaders such as Bashir Zaib Baloch, Gulzar Imam, and Mureed Baloch have led the violent strategy against Pakistani security forces and Chinese infrastructures for the last several years.

While Baluch militant groups have intermittently carried out armed assaults in and around Baluchistan province,

they have also often ventured into attacking Pakistan's major financial hubs such as Karachi, the provincial capital of Sindh province. However, the latest PSX violence that targeted the backbone of the Pakistani economy and Chinese investments were reminiscent of a similar campaign by Baluch militants when the BLA's Majeed Brigade targeted the Pearl Continental Hotel in the port city of Gwadar on May 11, 2019 ([Dawn](#), December 23, 2016; [The Business](#), May 12, 2019). The hotel was hosting around 40 Chinese nationals at the time of the siege. No Chinese citizens were hurt, but nine people, including four militants, were killed and several injured in that prolonged besiegement. Like PSX in Karachi, the Pearl Continental is known as a hub for Chinese engineers and business travelers and a symbol of Chinese investments in the Gwadar ([Express Tribune](#), May 13, 2019).

The BLA foreshadowed its anti-Chinese intentions by targeting the Chinese consulate in Karachi's Clifton area in November 2018. The consulate attack, though partially foiled, still resulted in seven deaths, including two police officials and three attackers ([Dawn](#), November 23, 2018). The attack was intended to target Chinese officials inside the consulate, directly assaulting the multi-billion-dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project. CPEC, a part of China's massive Belt and Road Initiative, is considered to be a symbol of the exploitation of the Baluch people and Baluchistan's natural resources and has been opposed by separatists since the beginning of the project. Under CPEC, an approximately 2,000 kilometer-long road and rail infrastructure project worth billions aims to connect Xinjiang, China with Gwadar port in Baluchistan. This is the motivating force behind Baluch resentment against Pakistan and the reasoning behind the perception of Chinese exploitation of natural resources. The other reason for anti-Pakistani sentiment among Baluch separatists is the demographic changes in the region due to CPEC and associated developments in the region. This change is mostly due to the exodus of Punjabis and Pashtuns to the province that have made ethnic Baluch people into a minority group.

Now, with the renewed violent campaigns across Baluchistan and beyond, Pakistan is seemingly facing resurgent Baluch ethno-separatism. If groups such as BLA or conglomerations like BRAS remain active and successful in targeting security and infrastructure, Pakistan will likely find it difficult to maintain a robust grip on a matured and motivated Baluch movement.

Animesh Roul is the executive director of the New Delhi-based policy research group Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict. He specializes in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, and armed conflict and violence in South Asia. Mr. Roul has written extensively on these subject areas, being published in edited books, journals, and policy magazines. He co-authored a book on India's indigenous terror group Indian Mujahideen (Springer, 2013). He is regularly cited in the *Washington Post*, *Reuters*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Hindustan Times* among others. He regularly contributes to *The Jamestown Foundation's Terrorism Monitor* and *Militant Leadership Monitor*.

Notes

[1] "Terrorist Designations of Balochistan Liberation Army and Husain Ali Hazzima and Amendments to the Terrorist Designations of Jundallah", July 2, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/terrorist-designations-of-balochistan-liberation-army-and-husain-ali-hazzima-and-amendments-to-the-terrorist-designations-of-jundallah/>

Al-Shabaab Attacks Spike, as COVID-19 Grips the World

Sunguta West

Al-Shabaab's recent attack targeting Somalia's head of the military is the latest indication of the Islamist militant group's growing confidence in its battle for control of the war-torn country in the Horn of Africa.

Al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa, has been waging a deadly insurgency in the country for 14 years. Its weapons of choice have ranged from improvised explosive devices (IED) and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), to deploying suicide bombers to target security forces, public installations, and government officials. Its war is largely asymmetrical, where it also relies on hit and run attacks, assassinations, and grenade attacks.

In the last few months, these attacks have accelerated as the world trains its focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. The latest increase in violence is lending credence to earlier predictions that the extremist group would take advantage of the pandemic to step-up attacks ([Daily Nation](#), April 25).

Like the rest of the world, cases of COVID-19 in Somalia are on the rise, surpassing 3,000 in mid-July. The spike has not affected al-Shabaab's terrorist activities, despite the government launching anti-COVID-19 social distancing measures in March. Its fighters have sustained their operations, increasingly targeting civilians, government officials, and security forces. The persistent attacks have further strained and frustrated the military response being carried out by the Somali National Army (SNA), which is backed by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops and U.S. forces.

Generally, most of the attacks can be described as low intensity, but numerous, disruptive, and daring. For example, on July 13, the militant group mounted a suicide attack targeting the head of the Somali military, General Yusuf Rageh. The VBIED was driven into General Rageh's convoy, as he left the defense headquarters in the capital Mogadishu.

Eyewitnesses said the attacker had attempted to strike the military convoy as it moved between the national stadium and the national army hospital in the Hodan

district of the capital city. However, soldiers guarding the general shot the VBIED, causing it to explode before it could hit its target. The general was not injured, but a civilian was killed in the blast ([Africa News](#), July 14; [Garowe Online](#), July 14).

Still, on July 4, the militant group detonated a landmine outside a restaurant on the outskirts of Baidoa, a town in the southwestern Bay region, killing five people and wounding ten others. In a statement claiming responsibility, the militant group said it was targeting tax collectors and soldiers who had converged in the restaurant for a meeting in the town located about 240 kilometers from Mogadishu.

On the same day, a suicide bomber drove a VBIED into a checkpoint outside the port of the capital. The bomber sped through the first check point before a police officer opened fire at the VBIED, which exploded outside the port's gate. The target was a police post outside the port. Two officers and five civilians were injured in the attack ([CGTN](#), July 5).

Fighting between SNA soldiers and al-Shabaab militants occurred on June 3 in Burdhabo district in Gedo region. The fighting, which left an unspecified number of casualties, started when al-Shabaab ambushed the government soldiers in the district ([Radio Dalsan](#), June 3).

The attacks came 11 days after al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing on a Turkish military training base in Somalia that killed two people. The bomber had concealed himself among young men who had gathered to join the Turkish academy in Mogadishu, which trains Somali soldiers ([CGTN](#), July 5).

Al-Shabaab has been able to mount the attacks since it still controls large swathes of territory, including towns, in southern Somalia. In the areas under its control, al-Shabaab leaders and fighters have been frustrating government efforts aimed at taming the spread of disease. While dispatching suicide bombers and assassins, its leaders have rejected containment and social distancing measures, telling the people to continue attending crowded mosques. It has also kept open Islamic schools and institutions in the area.

Top al-Shabaab leaders' radical interpretation of Islamic teachings has informed the rejection of the containment measures. The group used affiliated media channels Radio al-Furqan and Radio al-Andalus and social media channels such as Calamada and SomaliMemo at the ini-

tial stages of the pandemic to portray the disease as a punishment from God to non-believers for their evil deeds against Muslims and jihadists. The group suggested the disease was an American and European problem that had no impact in their region ([Daily Nation](#), April 20).

Months after beginning this disinformation campaign in opposition to government measures, al-Shabaab started responding to the virus. In Jilib, the town in southern Somalia that hosts the insurgency's latest base, al-Shabaab in mid-June launched an isolation and treatment facility, to treat all people including its fighters. Shaykh Mohammed Bali, a senior al-Shabaab leader and a member of the group's COVID-19 response team was quoted in the press as urging the people to seek treatment to avoid infecting other Muslims. The facility also had an associated hotline for people to call ([Africa News](#), June 13).

Some analysts say al-Shabaab leaders decided to launch the medical center after it became apparent that the disease would decimate its fighting force and lead to a loss of support if the organization did not provide help for the local people.

In the last few months, al-Shabaab has accelerated attacks and taken advantage as the world focuses its attention on the COVID-19 pandemic.

While COVID-19 adds one more challenge to a country besieged by war and frequent droughts, security experts need to provide more attention to the current state of affairs in Somalia so that al-Shabaab does not continue to take advantage of the pandemic to conduct attacks, recruit and gain more support. In the past, al-Shabaab has used such disasters to its advantage to recruit new fighters and reorganize for their continued fight against the government.

Sunguta West is an independent journalist based in Nairobi.

Boko Haram's Expansionary Project in Northwestern Nigeria: Can Shekau Outflank Ansaru and Islamic State in West Africa Province?

Jacob Zenn

On June 15, Boko Haram released a video featuring English, French (Cameroonian), Fulani, and Hausa-speaking fighters "greeting" fellow fighters in Zamfara and Niger states. [1] Three weeks later, on July 7, Boko Haram released another video of fighters in Niger State returning "greetings" to Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau and "brothers" in Zamfara, which is one of Nigeria's northwestern states; Lake Chad, which is the Boko Haram Bakura faction's base; and Sambisa, Borno, which is Shekau's base. [2] These back-to-back videos recall the process of the Bakura faction's pledge to Shekau one year earlier. Bakura's joining Boko Haram turned Nigerian jihadism's tide in Shekau's favor vis-à-vis his rivals in Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Ansarul Muslim Fi Biladis Sudan (Ansaru).

On September 23, 2019, Shekau had issued "greetings" to fighters on Lake Chad, which was reciprocated one day later in a video from an imam surrounded by two armed fighters near Lake Chad who claimed they were "commanded" by Bakura and "greeted" Shekau. [3] [4] These two videos followed a series of Boko Haram-claimed attacks around Lake Chad using styles copying Islamic State (IS), despite only ISWAP being formally part of IS. These actions heralded Boko Haram's resurgence in Lake Chad. Since Shekau's August 2016 ejection from ISWAP, Lake Chad had been exclusively ISWAP's area of operations, but by 2019 Boko Haram was also operating in the region. It was also only six months after those two videos that Boko Haram conducted the massive March 2020 raid in Bohoma, Chad that killed 92 Chadian soldiers stationed on Lake Chad. Shekau claimed responsibility for the raid. [5]

These signaling videos are not exclusive to Boko Haram. In 2010, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), for example, released videos featuring Nigerian Hausa, Guinean, Malian Tuareg, and Fulani fighters to demonstrate AQIM's expansion from Algeria to the Sa-

hel ([Al-Andalus](#), August 2010). This coincided with AQIM training Boko Haram members and preceded AQIM controlling territory in Mali in 2012 through local affiliates ([Al-Andalus](#), April 2017). Despite French-led counter-insurgency operations escalating from then onward, the Sahel has remained a jihadist hotbed.

Thus, the question remains whether Boko Haram's June and July 2020 videos about northwestern Nigeria will, like the group's September 2019 Lake Chad videos and AQIM's 2010 sub-Saharan African-oriented videos, lead to Boko Haram opening a new front in northwestern Nigeria or whether it will falter there like it has before.

Failed Forays and Recent Comebacks in Northwestern Nigeria

Neither ISWAP nor Boko Haram have attacked northwestern Nigeria with any consistency since ISWAP's November 2015 attack on Nigerian Shias marching between Kaduna and Kano. However, Boko Haram's efforts to expand to north-central and northwestern Nigeria from its northeastern Nigerian bases in Borno and its borderlands predate that 2015 attack. After Shekau declared jihad in July 2010, AQIM-trained Boko Haram members—including future U.S.-designated terrorists Khalid al-Barnawi and Abubakar Kamar—led cells in Kaduna, Kano, Plateau, and Kogi, from where Boko Haram conducted over 20 suicide bombings from June 2011 to 2013. [6] Shekau also commanded Boko Haram's attacks on Kano government buildings in January 2012 that led to nearly 200 civilian deaths. Al-Barnawi and Kamar's formed Ansaru with AQIM's approval as a separate faction from Boko Haram ([Al-Andalus](#), April 27). Ansaru opposed Shekau's killing of Muslim civilians. This combined with Boko Haram's loss of civilian support, security forces' dismantling Boko Haram and Ansaru cells in Kaduna and Kano, and the inability of Boko Haram's predominantly Kanuri fighters to integrate into Hausa areas, meant Boko Haram's jihad in north-central and northwestern Nigeria ceased in 2014.

Boko Haram, and ISWAP after its March 2015 formation, both concentrated only on Borno and neighboring Yobe and Adamawa states and borderland areas in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon after 2015. Meanwhile, Ansaru went into dormancy in 2015 following Shekau's loyalists executing some of its leaders for betraying their loyalty to Shekau, while other members defected to ISWAP ([Al-Haqaiq](#), June 2018). Nevertheless, Ansaru retained sleeper cells in northwestern Nigeria from 2015 onward, where it quietly developed hideouts and recruited

among Fulani bandits. Khalid al-Barnawi's deputy, for example, was a Fulani from Zamfara, which would have helped Ansaru recruitment there, and al-Barnawi kept arms stockpiled in Kaduna before his April 2016 arrest in Kogi ([The Cable](#), April 13, 2016).

Despite Boko Haram's fraught foray into northwestern Nigeria from 2011-2014, Shekau attempted to expand there again. This was evidenced by an internal Boko Haram video Shekau called "Message to Fulanis," specifically in Niger and Katsina states, in late 2014. However, the video was found in a Boko Haram camp and only released online by Nigerian media agencies in 2016. [7] Subsequent reports emerged that Boko Haram member Adam Bitri was arrested in Niger State in 2017 with two other Boko Haram members and that he had collaborated with Bakura to kidnap for ransom the elderly former minister Ali Monguno in Maiduguri, Borno as early as 2013 ([Punch](#), May 26, 2017). Bitri had also been reported in Boko Haram-controlled territories in Borno in 2014 and was again reported in 2019 to have left Boko Haram, joined ISWAP, and worked to connect ISWAP with Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria ([Vanguard](#), May 5, 2015). However, Bitri became disillusioned by Ansaru's excessively long-term approach and returned to Borno with no deal made ([Premium Times](#), February 27). Bitri subsequently clashed with ISWAP leadership and allied with Bakura, who became loyal to Shekau again in 2019 after having been with ISWAP since August 2016. Bitri apparently disapproved of ISWAP's comparatively moderate leadership. Shekau and ISWAP's bids in northwestern Nigeria from late 2014, therefore, failed amid factional squabbles, but neither group ceased trying to gain a foothold there.

ISWAP, for its part, finally claimed it launched an attack on Nigerian police in Sokoto, northwestern Nigeria in October 2019 from a base across the border in Niger ([Al-Naba #205](#), October 24, 2019). However, because ISWAP also encompasses the Mali, Burkina Faso, and northwestern Niger-based Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), which the United Nations and Nigerian "insider" journalist Ahmed Salkida's media agency, among other sources, reported as operating in northwestern Nigeria in 2019, it is possible ISGS was involved in launching that attack ([UN Security Council](#), July 15, 2019; [HumAngle](#), May 19, 2019). Moreover, despite Bitri's failed attempt to bridge ISWAP to Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria, the fact that some Ansaru members defected to, or collaborated with, ISWAP means it also cannot be discounted that jihadists operating in north-

western Nigeria and involved in the Sokoto attack had dual or overlapping affiliations to ISWAP and Ansaru, but not Boko Haram. Shekau's faction is despised by both ISWAP and Ansaru because of his declaring *takfir* (excommunication) on them. The United Nations notably asserted Ansaru "reactivated" in October 2019, which makes one question whether Ansaru was actually involved in the Sokoto attack that month ([UN Security Council](#), July 23, 2020).

Meanwhile, in February, villagers in Niger State also reported that bandits operating in their vicinity told them they were from ISWAP ([Daily Trust](#), February 10). This indicates ISWAP remained around northwestern Nigeria after October 2019, albeit without publicizing its presence in videos or other media. Like Ansaru, it was maintaining a low-profile in northwestern Nigeria to avoid attracting extra Nigerian military pressure, if not also foreign intelligence agencies' reconnaissance. In July, the Nigerian Air Force announced it killed ISWAP members in a Zamfara airstrike, but, according to Ahmed Salkida's colleague, Yusuf Anka, Ansaru members were killed in the airstrike ([HumAngle](#), July 12). This nonetheless again indicates the ISWAP-Ansaru overlap in northwestern Nigeria and confusion about how distinct they actually are in northwestern Nigeria.

Ansaru also demonstrated its presence in north-central and northwestern Nigeria by carrying out its first claimed attack in five years on a Yobe emir's convoy in Kaduna in January 2020 and then withstanding Nigerian security forces' retaliation on its hideouts ([The Cable](#), January 19; [Punch](#), February 6). Although Ansaru stated on Telegram it was not "ripe" for publicity yet, the ambush was claimed by al-Qaeda's semi-official media outlet, al-Thabat, in the name of "al-Qaeda in *Biladis Sudan* (Black Africa)." The attack occurred after several Ansaru members had traveled to Libya to train with IS, which again indicated Ansaru's ties to IS/ISWAP were not antagonistic. [8] Meanwhile, other Ansaru members arrested before Khalid al-Barnawi's own arrest had also intended to train in Sudan. At least one Ansaru member from Sudan was arrested in Niger State in June ([Punch](#), March 5, 2016; [HumAngle](#), June 30). That member's military fatigues and another slain "bandit's" similar military fatigues in Zamfara in July resembled ISWAP's uniforms. The uniforms suggested northwestern Nigeria's "bandits" were professionalizing, whether or not they affiliated with Ansaru or ISWAP, or both ([Twitter.com/ankaboy](#), July 16).

Friends With What Benefits? Shekau's Calculations in Northwestern Nigeria

Boko Haram's latest attempts to enter northwestern Nigeria reflect several trends. First, after seeing ISWAP and Ansaru gaining ground there in 2019, Shekau had to match his rivals. Shekau has already succeeded in defending southeastern Borno and neighboring parts of Cameroon from ISWAP's encroachment. However, if ISWAP or Ansaru established cells in northwestern Nigeria and Boko Haram did not, it would indicate Shekau's falling behind them and losing prestige as the top jihadist in Nigeria.

Moreover, after conducting the major Bohoma, Chad attack in March, Chad's army launched significant offensives against ISWAP and Boko Haram around Lake Chad. Both groups retreated, but ISWAP has rebounded in Chad more effectively than Boko Haram, including revealing high-grade Israeli weapons and other ammunition taken from Chadian soldiers in a July ambush several miles from Nigeria's border ([al-Naba, July 16](#)). Thus, Boko Haram's Bakura faction around Lake Chad is weakened and adding new Niger and Zamfara state factions would compensate for Boko Haram's struggles around Lake Chad.

Shekau has also remained more "Nigerian" than ISWAP or Ansaru. ISWAP has drifted from narratives related to condemning Nigerian government-aligned Salafists or Nigerian Muslim rulers not implementing sharia and now focuses predominantly on IS' global narratives. Ansaru, for its part, was always conciliatory toward Nigerian Salafists because it sought to win their support, but promised to "defend" Nigerian Muslims from Christians, represent al-Qaeda in Nigeria, and revive Usman dan Fodio's jihad. Dan Fodio was an 18th and early 19th century Fulani religious teacher and revolutionary jihadist. While dan Fodio-related narratives may resonate among some northwestern Nigerian Fulanis, albeit incongruously because dan Fodio was Sufi, Ansaru's top leaders' arrests and deaths have meant its ties to al-Qaeda's nearest affiliate, AQIM, are weakened. Moreover, the reduction in Nigerian Muslim-Christian clashes in the past decade means Ansaru's original *raison d'être* is also less pertinent.

Shekau and his Boko Haram loyalists, in contrast to ISWAP and Ansaru, scrutinize Nigerian Muslim discourses. In his videos, Shekau stalks Yobe-origin, but London-based, lawyer and analyst Bulama Bukarti, who opposes

Boko Haram on Twitter and in other writings. Shekau also still threatens Nigerian Salafist and Shia leaders like Isa Ali Pantami and Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, as well as Salkida's media agency, HumAngle ([HumAngle](#), July 14). Boko Haram's reference points might, therefore, have more common ground with rank-and-file northwestern Nigerians, including bandits, than more globally-oriented ISWAP or Ansaru.

Lastly, through kidnapping-for-ransom operations and village raids in Borno and its borderlands, Boko Haram has accumulated significant wealth over the past decade. The group, therefore, can certainly offer financial resources, military training, and 'Islamic' credibility to bandit groups that are competing not only with each other, but also fighting the Nigerian Army and Air Force, which has bombarded bandit camps. Such support would improve the bandits' battle preparedness and professionalization and recruitment. In turn, bandit-turned-Boko Haram members' loyalty to Shekau and attacks in northwestern Nigeria would boost Shekau's prestige and his ideological goal of spreading jihad throughout Nigeria, just as the Bakura faction did for Shekau in Lake Chad. Boko Haram could also charge the bandits fees or a "tax" for its military assistance to them in a win-win deal.

Conclusion

Abubakar Shekau may appear 'crazy' in videos, but he is the longest-lasting jihadist leader globally. He became the leader of Boko Haram in 2010, one year before Aymen al-Zawahiri took over leading al-Qaeda. Boko Haram's latest videos affirm Shekau remains Boko Haram's undisputed leader and intends to create a hub-and-spoke organizational model with the Sambisa base being the hub and Zamfara and Niger states, Lake Chad, and Cameroon being spokes. Notwithstanding Shekau's Nigerian orientation, one cannot discount his ambition. If his new expansionary project succeeds in northwestern Nigeria, Salkida's suggestion that Shekau would attempt to create his own "African jihadist caliphate" project to compete with al-Qaeda and Islamic State also cannot be ruled out ([HumAngle, Jul 12](#)). Senegal, whose citizens fought with Boko Haram in Borno, would be one such location where Shekau has loyalists who could orchestrate attacks or at least help him fundraise ([See TM](#) May 4, 2018).

That said, Shekau's expansionary project and related Boko Haram videos should be seen as a reaction to ISWAP's and Ansaru's prior entrenchment in northwest-

ern Nigeria. Moreover, while the latter two groups have slow, steady, and surreptitious projects, Shekau's is full of bluster. In the long-term, the other two groups' more patient and civilian-centric approaches will help them win over bandit groups, professionalize them so they can withstand increasing pressure from security forces, and guide them in administering villages and towns from which the government is absent, or retreat in an 'Islamic' way that legitimizes their rule. Although ISWAP and seem more likely to succeed than Boko Haram, Shekau has historically overcome all odds to survive multiple attempts to kill him and even won over the Bakura faction in 2019. Thus, his eccentricity, reported Kanuri favoritism, and other vices might not preclude Boko Haram from gaining a northwestern Nigerian foothold.

In the short-term, Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Ansaru will likely compete for the loyalty of northwestern Nigerian bandit groups and clash similarly to fights between ISGS and al-Qaeda loyalists in Mali and Burkina Faso. However, one key dynamic is the potential for ISWAP and Ansaru to overcome their conflicting loyalties to IS and al-Qaeda and instead cooperate to keep Shekau out of the northwestern Nigerian frontier and harm the reputation of the jihadists like they accuse of him of doing elsewhere in Nigeria. Boko Haram and ISWAP brigades in Borno will nevertheless both benefit from the Nigerian Army and Airforce's diverting resources from Borno, where Boko Haram is actually targeted with airstrikes more frequently than ISWAP, to northwestern Nigeria.

Nigeria should approach Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria as the most serious security crisis since the insurgency began in the northeast in 2010. As detrimental as the crisis there has become, Boko Haram and ISWAP are relatively contained in Borno and its borderlands; the groups have struggled to break out of predominantly Kanuri areas into majority Hausa-Fulani areas. However, if these jihadist groups gain a foothold in northwestern Nigeria, there are few physical or socio-cultural boundaries that will prevent their continued expansion until northern Nigeria becomes overwhelmed and possibly inextricably linked with rising insecurity elsewhere in the neighboring Sahel region. In such a case, Nigeria's territorial integrity will become even more gravely threatened.

Jacob Zenn is an adjunct assistant professor on African armed movements at Georgetown University's Security Studies Program and a senior fellow on African affairs at

the Jamestown Foundation. Zenn's new book, "Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria," was published in April 2020 by Lynne Rienner in association with the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, University of St Andrews.

Notes

[1] The video can be seen at this weblink: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2020/06/19/boko-haram-learn-a-lesson-for-those-who-have-eyes-video-including-to-northwestern-nigerian-bandits-june-15-2020/>

[2] The video can be seen at this weblink: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2020/07/10/boko-haram-greetings-to-the-mujahideen-from-niger-state-video-july-7-2020/>

[3] The video can be seen at this weblink: <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/>

[4] Ibid.

[5] Shekau's claim can be seen at this weblink: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2020/04/02/boko-haram-abubakar-shekau-special-message-to-chadian-president-idris-deby-audio-april-1-2020/>. The group's attack video can also be seen at this weblink (graphic): <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2020/05/10/boko-haram-and-that-our-hosts-they-very-would-be-the-victors-video-on-bohoma-chad-operation-may-8-2020/>.

[6] For a list of these suicide bombings, see the Appendix of Zenn, Jacob. "A Primer on Boko Haram Sources and Three Heuristics on al-Qaida and Boko Haram in Response to Adam Higazi, Brandon Kendhammer, Kyari Mohammed, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, and Alex Thurston." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 3 (June 2018): 74–91. <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2018/issue-3/06---special-correspondence-a-primer-on-boko-haram-sources-and-three-heuristics-on-al-qaida-and-boko-haram-in-response-to-.pdf>

[7] The video can be seen at this weblink: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/04/09/iswap-investigate-video-march-31-2016-and-march-24-2016-surrender-video/>

[8] See page 267-270 of Zenn, Jacob, Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria, Lynner Rienner: Boulder, CO, April 2020.