



SAR Consultancy (Security Analysis and Research)
Special Bulletin – Leadership Challenges in Boko Haram



August 2016

This time last year, there was an alleged leadership challenge to Boko Haram, with President Deby of Chad reporting in the international media that Mahamat Daoud was the new leader of Boko Haram. However, as in the past with similar allegations of changes in leadership, no real evidence was provided to substantiate the claims. Now, a year on, a leadership change within Boko Haram is being reported in the headlines. This time allegedly made by the Islamic State (IS). It was reported that the new leader of Boko Haram is Abu Musab al-Barnawi, an alleged former spokesperson for the group. However, within hours Shekau, or the person purporting to be him, released an audio recording in which he is alleged to have said that he was deceived. Albeit not dismissing the change, he gave his commitment not to stray from the ideology of Boko Haram. Unlike alleged leadership challenges in the past, much more is known about Al-Barnawi that many of the previous individuals mentioned to succeed Shekau. In addition, the lack of an outright dismissal by Shekau of the leadership challenge would lend some credibility to IS's claim. Therefore, if IS's claim is correct and if Shekau is still determined to continue Boko Haram's ideology what might the impact be? This piece will aim to answer this by formulating three possible scenarios.

Introduction

Earlier this week, international media outlets reported that Islamic State (IS) announced a new leader of the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) or more commonly known as Boko Haram. This was proclaimed in their recent edition of the Al-Naba magazine. IS allegedly named Abu Musab al-Barnawi as the replacement for the group's leadership, which was formerly held by Abubakar Shekau. While there seemed to be an immediate level of credibility in the announcement, many analysts highlighted concerns that a simple shift in leadership may not be possible given that Boko Haram was not a monolithic entity. Some analysts, including those at SAR, thought the announcement may be better understood if examined from the possible perspective that a split is occurring in Boko Haram. Given previous splits within the group, it is suggested that this may be indicative of a re-emerging rift between the traditional Boko Haram, for

Who are ANSARU?

ANSARU was a splinter group of Boko Haram. It emerged in late 2011, early 2012. Despite links, this group differed from Boko Haram in target selection, ideology, tactically and geographically and rejected the takfiri nature of Boko Haram's activities. They focused largely on kidnapping of western targets like Al Qaida in the Maghreb (AQIM), a group to which they were alleged closely aligned. The U.S. government designated ANSARU a Foreign Terrorist Organisation on 13 November, 2013.

want of a better explanation and Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis (ANSARU), or something similar.

What is known about Al-Barnawi?

Al-Barnawi is the son of the late Mohammed Yusuf. Until recently he was the spokesperson for Boko Haram. Some analysts have suggested that he was being prepped to take over the leadership for some time. It is alleged that he connected with Mamman Nuur, an alleged influencer of ANSARU in the last few months.

The credibility of the announcement

As mentioned above, IS's alleged announcement had aspects that provided a higher level of credibility than previous alleged leadership challenges. These include the alleged appointment of an individual who is said to have links with others who have alleged links to ANSARU and former links to AQIM. Furthermore, changes in the recent PR strategy of Boko Haram, which had become much more in line with IS's propaganda machine in the last 12-16 months, may also have been indicative of deeper links. However, the one thing that made analysts at SAR, like others, a little hesitant to accept it in its entirety was the lack of reference from or of Shekau. Given the last four to five years, it seemed a significant absence from the announcement. The first thought that did come to mind was that this could be a clear indication that Shekau was in fact dead, as alleged on numerous occasions before. However, due to the past, many analyst waited with bated breath for Shekau, or the person purporting to be him, to respond, and within hours he did.

Shekau's response?

The first striking thing about Shekau's statement was that it significantly differed from those made by him before to alleged leadership challenges. For one he did not come out with a definitive dismissal of the allegation, rather he said he was deceived, but that he would not stray from the ideology of Boko Haram. One aspect of the statement was interesting, in that despite referring to the pledge of allegiance to IS but did not appear to proclaim a full commitment to their teachings and activities, rather reaffirming his belief in those of Boko Haram. So what may this mean for Boko Haram, ISWAP and security in Nigeria?

Theoretical underpinnings

A change of leadership within a group can be a significant event and can be debilitating for the

Timeline

Oct 2014

Shekau declares a caliphate in North East Nigeria

Jan 2015

Al Barnwai became the self-acclaimed spokesperson for Boko Haram

March 2015

Pledge of allegiance by Boko Haram to IS, resulting in a name change to ISWAP, purported to have been made by Shekau

August 2015

Allegations of a change in leadership, made by President of Chad

August 2016

Allegations of a change of leadership, made by IS

August 2016

Response by Shekau, but not a definitive dismissal.

group. However, research in this area has shown that there are numerous factors which can and do impact the significance of such a change. If there is a collective acceptance of leadership within a group and if this leader provides ideological and directional leadership to the group, then research has shown that such a leader may bring together others of shared cultural and ideological similarities thereby ensuring their position and the possible development of successive leaders. Shekau would appear to have been such a leader. However, research has shown that if this type of leader is decapitated from the group then the group may suffer. However, given Shekau's response it does not seem to imply that he has been completely ousted from his seat yet, at least in his mind. Another difference from this scenario is that it would appear that there is not one single group in the first place, and therefore this scenario may not be comparable. Interestingly, research has shown that if there is no clear leadership within a group, or if the leadership or structure is fragmented, then decapitating the leader is shown to have limited impact on the group. If this scenario is taken, it may be fair to conclude that even if Al-Barnawi takes on the mantle of the leader of ISWAP, it may have little impact on Boko Haram proper. But is splintering within Boko Haram a real possibility?

Possibility of a split in Boko Haram

Marine Lieutenant General Thomas Waldhauser, a senior US General recently reported that Boko Haram was fractured internally with a group splintering from Shekau to IS.ⁱ It was alleged that the motivation behind the split was that Shekau was not adhering to the guidance provided by IS. The General was reported to have noted that this split was the result of the limited influence that IS has had over Boko Haram since its pledge of allegiance in March 2015. This may be somewhat credible given that a US report in June 2016 noted that there was no evidence that Boko Haram had received significant operational support or financing by IS.ⁱⁱ The lack of a significant change in MO or target selection since the pledge of allegiance by Boko Haram may also provide credibility, in part, to such claim. Despite this however, there has been reports of Nigerian nationals travelling to Iraq and Syria, but more recently to Libya to join the ranks of IS. Whether this was to fight or to receive training and return to Nigeria and Boko Haram remains unclear, or whether all these were members of Boko Haram remains unclear.

What else is known?

What does all this mean for Boko Haram? Well the group has been in existence for a significant period of time, it has gone through and survived a leadership change, which in fact would appear to have brought about an evolution into a more violent and extreme group. Furthermore, there has been splits and breakaway groups from Boko Haram in the past, as mentioned above. In respect to Shekau, if a significant challenge to his leadership was to be successful, a new leader is likely to have come from the cohort which supports the out-going leader rather than from a breakaway challenge if the group was to remain successful. This would be likely to be required to ensure his compliance. If a significant challenge for leadership was to come from outside this group, then the new leader would require the support of a critical mass of the group to reinforce his new role. At present, there would appear to be no evidence to suggest that Shekau has lost his support. Therefore a simple leadership change is unlikely in real terms. Furthermore, there appears to be no evidence that Al-Barnawi has the critical mass to oust Shekau from his position, despite claims of a change. That said, the claim may have been somewhat misinterpreted, as there may be validity in the view that he does have a growing mass that is more supportive of IS activities and desire a more aligned group under IS guidance. These may come

from within Boko Haram or from outside. If this is the case, there is unlikely to be a direct attempt to oust Shekau. Statements may be made by both sides claiming their legitimacy, yet without direct challenges to the claims of each other. Let's look at three possible scenarios given what is known!

Possible Scenarios

Given that much of the analysis is based on emerging data and conjecture, forecasting the impact of reports of a change in leadership can be extremely difficult. As a result, scenario building is likely to be the most appropriate way of forecasting what may happen next.

Status Quo Scenario

A simple leadership change takes place and as with the leadership of Shekau, under Al-Barnawi's leadership Boko Haram's allegiance to IS will be symbolic and largely used to build Boko Haram's notoriety on the international stage. The direct impact will be negligible, resulting in limited, if any, changes to the current status quo of Boko Haram, its MO, target selection and frequency of attacks. While SAR analysts do not think this scenario is probable, it cannot be ruled out.

Possible scenario

If Al Barnawi's leadership of Boko Haram is accepted without resistance by Shekau and members the group, they may take on a more active role in demonstrating their alignment to IS. If such a shift were to happen it is likely to be played out in a similar vein to what has happened in other countries or regions where groups have aligned to IS, such as Bangladesh, Baghdad, Libya and Europe. Attacks or attempted attacks on highly desirable targets such as international hotels, airports, churches and places where large numbers congregate may become more likely. Conversely, it could be argued that this shift may result in a reduction of attacks in the North East, given a change in ideology.

However, it was on this issue that this scenario became a little less credible before Shekau's response and one which became even more unrealistic afterwards. Many of the motivations of the insurgency in the North East are not likely to be abandoned on foot of a more aligned role to IS, but, a more aligned group to IS are less likely to get away with some of the groups original tactics, given allegations

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that IS have already voiced their distaste at the use of children as suicide bombers. This may, in part, contribute to opposing ideologies in the group. Under these conditions, the group may not be very cohesive. Furthermore, this scenario also assumes a monolithic structure within Boko Haram, which as mentioned above, is not deemed to be credible.

More likely scenario

Based on the information currently available, the most likely scenario appears to be that Boko Haram and ISWAP become two different entities, with alignment and support where advantageous to both groups, similar to ANSARU. Boko Haram are likely to remain a Nigerian, and more specifically a North Eastern focused group, while ISWAP is likely to emerge in its own right as a group, aligned to IS, to conduct operations in the Western Africa. Given that these links are likely to have been developing over the last year or so and that some of its members are likely to have had links to ANSARU and AQIM, ISWAP are highly likely to be have the capacity and competence to start conducting operations in the medium term, if not short term. As mentioned above, the choice of target is likely to be more reflective of IS targets, which include; airports, hotels, public transport stations and systems, stadium, market places, public events where large groups are gathered. In Nigeria high risk states are likely to include the FCT Abuja, Lagos, Port Harcourt, Kano and Kaduna, given the numbers of internationals and the ease to which internationals navigate these environments. That said, low profile attacks are also likely and should not be ruled out. In this case, targets are likely to be less specific, harder to forecast and could be conducted by supporters of IS or members of the group. If this scenario is correct, there is cause for concern. Security resources are already stretched in Nigeria. Countries already experiencing or at risk of IS attacks know the level of investment in human and financial resources to respond to the threat, resources which may be limited in Nigeria, given the ongoing security challenges throughout the country and the deteriorating economic situation. SAR Consultancy assesses that if this scenario is correct, incidents indicative of an IS cell are likely to be seen in the short to medium term.

Conclusion

Given the information available, the available data presents more indicators of a possible split within Boko Haram rather than a simple change in leadership of a monolithic entity. If correct, what does this mean for accessing the North East? It will still be a challenge from a security perspective for the medium to long term. In short, there is nothing to suggest these allegations will result in any significant positive change to the current security environment. That said, a secondary pattern of incidents on targets such as those mentioned above is likely to emerge illustrating the activities of an aligned group to IS. If this last scenario, is correct, the security situation in Nigeria is likely to deteriorate further and in a manner that is less geographically restricted and more high profile target driven.

SAR Consultancy would like to thank you for taking the time to read this bulletin. We hope you found it interesting. Please do not hesitate to contact us info@sarconint.com to discuss any part in greater detail or to discuss how we may be able to help reduce your exposure to any of the risks mentioned within. Furthermore we are very happy to receive feedback on your thoughts regarding the bulletin. Hope to see you again next month.

ⁱ Stewart, P. (2016), Boko Haram fracturing over Islamic State ties, U.S. general warns, 21 June 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nigeria-boko-haram-idUSKCN0Z72WT>

ⁱⁱ Stewart, P. (2016), Boko Haram fracturing over Islamic State ties, U.S. general warns, 21 June 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nigeria-boko-haram-idUSKCN0Z72WT>