



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



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Over the last week, President Deby of Chad has been reported in the international media as saying that Boko Haram has a new leader, who he went on to name as Mahamat Daoud. He then claimed that Daoud was ready to negotiate with the Nigerian Government. Exactly what motivated such comments still remain unclear, but such assertions made by President Deby are likely to be received by many as credible given his alleged role in negotiations last year between Boko Haram and the Nigerian Government. These claims have also led to further speculation of Shekau's death. All that said, many analysts were reluctant to throw caution to the wind and accept such assertions as credible given the numerous false accounts of Shekau's demise over the last two years and the numerous accounts of negotiations with Boko Haram with limited results. Such caution appears to have been well placed given reports of an audio message by Shekau denouncing claims that he no longer leads the group. Notwithstanding all that, the key issue here is not whether Daoud is in fact the new leader of Boko Haram or whether the audio is actually the voice of Shekau, the important questions that arise from all the discussion are, would a change in leadership within Boko Haram significantly change the activities of the group, and if so are there any indicators that this is currently taking place?

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### **Introduction**

Before examining whether a change in leadership within Boko Haram would significantly impact the group, and if there are indicators that this is currently taking place, let us first look at how credible the claims are that Daoud is a new leader of Boko Haram, for argumentative purposes? As mentioned above, the credibility of such a claim was questioned last week by some analyst, especially given that at first no one appeared to know who Daoud was and where he had come from. This has changed over recent days, with some suggesting that Daoud was a student member of the group under Yusuf. Nonetheless, the reported assertions that Daoud was the new leader and straight away appeared willing to enter into negotiations with the Government made many question the authenticity of such claims. That being said, such claims did fuel speculation amongst many that Shekau had definitely been killed and Boko Haram was going through a shift of leadership. While some reporters appeared to accept such proclamations whole heartedly, the majority of analysts monitoring Boko Haram and Shekau for some time, remained less absolute, or in many cases silent. Some suggested that even if Shekau had died or was imprisoned, the level of violence since February and especially since the elections was such that Boko Haram had not significantly changed since his reported demise, but acknowledged the possibility of a split. The general agreement appeared to be that such claims were best viewed with caution, given that no significant evidence had been presented and given the level of false claims in the past. Few went further into examining the impact of such a leadership shift and did little by way of identifying possible indicators that this may be taking place. This bulletin attempts to do just that.

### Theoretical underpinnings

Change of leadership within any group is, in the majority of incidents, a significant event and can be debilitating. However, research in this area has shown that there are numerous factors which can and do impact the significance of such change. For example, 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. Should this type of leader be decapitated from the group, then research has shown that the group may suffer but research has shown that the longer a group has been active, there is less of an impact of such a leadership change. On the other hand, 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.

### Debate as to the current leadership of Boko Haram

*What does all this mean for Boko Haram?* Well the group have 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, namely ANSARU. In the absence of a significant challenge for leadership, a new leader is more likely to have come from the cohort which supports the out-going leader rather than from a breakaway challenge. If there has been a significant challenge for leadership, then the new leader would require the support of a critical mass of the group to reinforce his new role yet this has not been publically seen to date. All that said, it *may be useful to flip the question, is there any evidence that Shekau, or those purporting to be him, have lost their critical mass of support?* Given the ongoing violence in the North East of Nigeria there would not appear to be specific evidence that there has been a change in the group's activities and or support for Shekau's apparent leadership. In fact, it may actually be easier to provide support for an argument that the leadership has changed to someone of similar mindset to Shekau rather than that there has been a challenge to such a leadership, as suggested above.

That being said, if one accepts the arguments that Shekau is dead and that Boko Haram has been defeated and splintered and if the research referred to above applies here, the impact of such this loss of leadership is likely to have no significant impact. But let us not move that far just yet, and assume no split but there has been a direct challenge, would Daoud or anyone else for that matter acquire the critical mass required to influence a significant change within the group, without seeing a significant change in the activities of the group and what may have motivated this shift? Some analysts have suggested that a split emerged in Boko Haram motivated by the pledge of allegiance to IS because not all members of the group wanted to join the caliphate. This is entirely plausible given the very national direction of much of Boko Haram's attacks and traditional ideological approach. However, it is difficult to provide evidence that this disagreement resulted in a significant split. If it did, it would appear that it has not had a direct impact on the violent members of the group, given that the level of violence since the pledge does not appear to have significantly changed. That being said, there has been no significant change in MO since the pledge which would evidence a shift of MO more in line with IS either. The absence of such a shift towards an IS MO may have resulted in the

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absence of an actual catalyst to compound such a split beyond rhetoric rather than a shift in levels of acceptable violence and activities.

*Irrespective of whether there is evidence or indicators of such a shift, let us look at what it would mean for Boko Haram if there was a new challenge to the leadership of the group and or a leader of a breakaway section was willing to negotiate with the government?* If we take claims that Daoud does represent part of Boko Haram and does want to negotiate with the government, it remains unclear what this would mean for the group, or more importantly for the security situation in the North East, given that the audio by Shekau or those purporting to be him, indicates there is still a cohort of resistance to such negotiations. For a new leadership and related negotiations to have a significant impact there would need to be a critical mass of members willing to desist from violence, without this the violence is likely to continue, albeit maybe with less actors. If Daoud's group had this critical mass, and if there was a willingness within this breakaway group to provide information to the government, the remaining members of Boko Haram could become increasingly vulnerable. That being said, there is a huge assumption in this, and that is that the ideological drive previously motivating Boko Haram, under Shekau even prior to the allegiance to IS, is also dismissed by this critical mass. If this shift in ideology is not present it is unlikely that any successful negotiations could be achieved that would meet the traditional demands of Boko Haram. There is no evidence that there has been such a shift. When one looks at the past, it becomes evident that something significant would have had to change for that critical mass within the group for it to get to a point of willingness to negotiate. A simple point that they would need to accept is that the government is the rightful group to negotiate with, something which has been dismissed by Shekau and the group before.

*What may have changed of late that may drive this shift beyond the pledge of allegiance to IS?* Notwithstanding that a significant catalyst for such a shift of leadership within Boko Haram and a willingness to negotiate with the Nigerian government has yet to be identified, some have tried to present a few alternatives. President Deby is reported to have suggested that the group's change of approach is due to the progress of the military offensive and that the group are on the back foot. Such a view may also be attributed to the Nigerian Government

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given recent statements by President Buhari that the group will be defeated in the next three months. If one takes the recent statements by President Deby as fact it would not be difficult to create credible arguments that purport there may be members of the group who sit on the periphery who are willing to negotiate. If one accepts that there are social and economic drivers influencing membership to Boko Haram, a willingness to negotiations may be driven by a desire to get a better deal from the government given the change in administration. Nonetheless, irrespective of whether Daoud does want to negotiate and even if there is a critical mass to have significant impact on the current level of violence within the group, it is likely that there will be a group remaining who will not desist from violence, and will do so at a level that results in a continued security challenge. The lack of a strict hierarchical structure within Boko Haram cannot be dismissed, and based on the past, and on research in this area, it is unlikely that any change in leadership would be significant enough to see immediate and long term peace. The continued level of violence and now with the alleged audio message from Shekau or the person purporting to be him is indicative that a group, regardless of how small one may argue this is, still remain in existence and is likely to continue asserting its presence through violence.

*So with the lack of evidence and indicators, let us reframe the claims presented, could such claims be coming from Deby and or the Nigerian government and not being manifested from within Boko Haram? Could it be that they created this debate as a ruse to flush Boko Haram out? Such an allegation could not be ruled out, but Shekau or those purporting to be him have demonstrated before that they do not respond to every allegation made against them. There are no apparent drivers that would prompt such a response unless Shekau wanted to respond. In addition, given the last two to three years and the range of false accounts of negotiations, changes of leaders, reports of Shekau's death, etc., it would be negligent not to view these claims by President Deby and Daoud without skepticism or provide them with the attribution of being part of a greater plan.*

## **Conclusion**

All this said, it would appear at present that there is no significant evidence that there has been a change in leadership within Boko Haram that would lead to a significant portion of the group being willing to negotiate with the Nigerian Government. However, a good indicator that is worth monitoring to demonstrate such claims are correct is the level of violence. Irrespective of whether Shekau is alive or dead, a clear indication that Daoud is credible both in actions and words, and also that he has the necessary critical mass of group members behind him would be to see a significant reduction in the level of violence within the North East, until this is evident, it is more probable that there has been no significant change within Boko Haram leadership that will significantly change the immediate future of the group. If a leadership change has taken place, it is likely to be by someone of the same cohort as Shekau. 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.

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