

# Boko Haram's Split

## Is the al-Barnawi faction as moderate as thought?

In March 2015, the then undisputed leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS), in an audio recording posted on the group's Twitter account. Less than 18 months later, IS shunned Shekau, appointing Abu Musab al-Barnawi the new leader of its West African *wilayat*. Despite Shekau's rejection of the move, the stage was set for Boko Haram's internal rift.

Two factions thus emerged, both operating in the northeastern parts of Nigeria and the Lake Chad basin. The Shekau faction has received a larger share of media coverage — owing in large part to its leader's relatively frequent and eloquent propaganda videos — but the al-Baranwi faction remains as deadly as Shekau's.

This document analyses al-Barnawi's public relations (PR) tactics to undermine his rival, the discrepancy between his (al-Barnawi's) faction's declared ideology and its actual treatment of civilians, as well as an analysis of some of the faction's recent attacks. The document concludes by examining whether Boko Haram's fragmentation has benefitted (or can benefit) the Nigerian army and its allies.

### AL-BARNAWI FACTION'S MAIN FIGURES



**Abu Musab al-Barnawi**

Al-Barnawi is believed to be the son of Mohammed Yusuf, who founded Boko Haram in 2002, and remained the group's spiritual leader until his death in 2009.

Al-Barnawi was Boko Haram's spokesperson before the group pledged allegiance to IS. He was named Boko Haram leader by IS in 2016 to replace Abubakar Shekau, who disputed the nomination.



**Mamman Nur**

A Cameroonian national, Nur was born in Maroua, the capital of Cameroon's Far North Region

He is thought to have trained with AQIM fighters and visited al-Shabaab in Somalia. He was one of the leaders of Boko Haram splinter group Ansaru. Some analysts believe he was behind Boko Haram's split and could be the real leader and strategist of the al-Barnawi faction.

## The al-Barnawi faction: a discrepancy between proclaimed ideology and actions

Shekau's ruthlessness and indiscriminate attacks against civilians formed the basis for his ousting by IS. His "successor", Abu Musab al-Barnawi (not to be confused with Khalid al-Barnawi<sup>1</sup>), believed to be the son of the late Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf, took no time to cast Shekau in a bad light. In an audio recording released soon after his nomination by IS, al-Barnawi accused Shekau, of "violating Islamic tenets by killing fellow Muslims, and living a life of luxury with his wives, neglecting starving women and children<sup>2</sup>", among other things.

Delivered in the local Hausa language, rather than Arabic, Al-Barnawi's comments above were framed in a manner to present himself as a champion for social justice, a publicity stunt meant to attract sympathy from the majority Muslim communities in northeast Nigeria, where both factions of Boko Haram operate. This stance was later reinforced by al-Barnawi's message during an interview with IS magazine *al-Naba*, that his fighters were to avoid targeting Muslims, but direct their violence towards Christians and churches.<sup>3</sup>

There have been accounts suggesting a reduction of violence in areas controlled by the al-Barnawi faction, with fighters deliberately revealing their faction loyalty to civilians during raids, and telling them — ironically — that they would not harm them<sup>4</sup>.

Yet other accounts have cast the al-Barnawi faction as equally brutal towards civilians as its Shekau's counterpart. In fact, the al-Barnawi faction has been accused of abducting young girls, looting food and medical supplies, killing — at times mutilating — anyone suspected of collaborating with the army or those who refuse to pay "protection" taxes<sup>5</sup>.

It may not take much effort to realize that al-Barnawi's proclaimed mercy towards his "fellow" Muslims is impractical at the best, and a campaign to deceive at the worst. A UN report released in early 2017 revealed that both factions of Boko Haram were running out of cash and unable to pay their foreign fighters<sup>6</sup>. If the above-mentioned UN report is anything to go by, neither of the two factions can survive without preying on the local population, including Muslims — a deed which requires coercion by deadly force.

## With the deadliest attack, so far in 2017: the al-Barnawi faction is not as dormant as it may appear

The al-Barnawi faction was responsible for the 28 January 2017 attack against government troops, in which at least three soldiers were killed (five, according to the militant group), in the village of Kamuya, approximately 5 km from Buratai town, Borno state<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Real name: Usman Umar Abubakar. He was the leader of Boko Haram splinter group, Ansaru until his arrest by the Nigerian army in late March or early April 2016, on cases of kidnappings and murder of some of his captives.

<sup>2</sup> Sahara Reporters, "New Boko Haram Leader, al-Barnawi, Accuses Abubakar Shekau Of Killing Fellow Muslims, Living In Luxury", Available online at <http://saharareporters.com/2016/08/05/new-boko-haram-leader-al-barnawi-accuses-abubakar-shekau-killing-fellow-muslims-living> (Accessed on 22/08/2016).

<sup>3</sup> Ventures, "The New Boko Haram Leader And His Strategy For Terrorism In Nigeria", Available online at <http://venturesafrica.com/the-new-boko-haram-leader-and-his-strategy-for-terrorism-in-nigeria/> (Accessed on 22/08/2017).

<sup>4</sup> Mail Online, "Boko Haram faction seeks grassroots support in NE Nigeria", Available online at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-4364104/Boko-Haram-faction-seeks-grassroots-support-NE-Nigeria.html> (Accessed on 25/08/2017).

<sup>5</sup> Maghreb and Sahel, "Abu Musab al Barnawi: Ideals vs. Reality", Available online at <https://maghrebandsahel.wordpress.com/2017/04/19/abu-musab-al-barnawi-ideals-vs-reality/> (Accessed on 24/8/2017).

<sup>6</sup> Newsweek, "Boko Haram Factions 'Cannot Pay Fighters' Salaries:' U.N. Report", Available online at <http://www.newsweek.com/boko-haram-isis-nigeria-554112> (Accessed on 24/8/2017).

<sup>7</sup> Vanguard, "Al-Barnawi Boko Haram faction responsible for recent attack", Available online at <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2017/01/al-barnawi-boko-haram-faction-responsible-recent-attack/> (Accessed on 25/8/2017).

The faction was also responsible for the abduction of at least 22 girls in two separate attacks in the villages of Pulka and Dumba, in Borno State, near Lake Chad, on 30 April 2017<sup>8</sup>.

More importantly, the al-Barnawi faction was responsible for Boko Haram's deadliest operation so far, this year (2017). In the attack, which took place in the Magumeri area of Borno state, on 25 July, at least 69 people, among them 19 Nigerian soldiers, were killed when the militants ambushed a heavily-guarded team of employees of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation and geologists; three people were kidnapped<sup>9</sup>.

The 25 July 2017 attack sets itself apart, not only for its precision, sheer brutality and the significance of the targets, but also for taking place at a time when Boko Haram had spent nearly six months of reduced activism, as we observed in our previous publication.<sup>10</sup> The attack prompted some analysts, including Malte Liewerscheidt, to suggest that the al-Barnawi faction may be better organized than its Shekau's counterpart<sup>11</sup>.

It appears, from at least two recorded incidents of direct clash between the two factions, that the al-Barnawi faction may be having an upper hand on Shekau's group.

On 31<sup>st</sup> August 2016, an unspecified number of Shekau's men were reportedly killed in fighting with their rivals, in the Marte district of Borno state, while a further three were killed on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2016, in Yele and Arafa villages, in the same state<sup>12</sup>.

These two incidents mentioned above date back one year and may not be an accurate measure of the two factions' strength. Further research is thus needed to determine whether Liewerscheidt's assessment is accurate.

Yet the incidents reviewed above dispel the perception that the al-Barnawi's faction is dormant, a perception created by its rival faction's wider news coverage and publicity.

## Conclusion: does the Boko Haram factionalism constitute an advantage to the Nigerian army?

The rivalry between Boko Haram's two known factions cannot be disputed — and will probably carry on — so long as there is competition for resources, as the two groups continue to operate in the same region. In fact, al-Barnawi predicted in a video released this year (2017) that the Nigerian army would defeat the Shekau faction due to the latter's indiscriminate attacks against innocent Muslims<sup>13</sup>.

Yet, despite their proven rivalry, nothing indicates that the two factions are directly engaged in a war against each other. Moreover, past incidents of direct confrontation have only been occasional.

The two factions' primary targets remain the same: government troops and other symbols of the state, as well as western 'interests' in the region.

There is nothing suggesting that the Nigerian army and its allies have benefitted from the Boko Haram split. On the contrary, more resources and coordination efforts may be need on their part, as they face two terrorist groups operating independently of each other.

<sup>8</sup> The Sun, "Al-Barnawi's Boko Haram abducts 22 girls, women in Borno", Available online at <http://sunnewsonline.com/al-barnawis-boko-haram-abducts-22-girls-women-in-borno/> (Accessed on 25/8/2017).

<sup>9</sup> Z News, 'Boko Haram ambush death toll hits 69', Available online at <http://zeenews.india.com/world/boko-haram-ambush-death-toll-hits-69-2028460.html> (Accessed on 02/8/2017)

<sup>10</sup> OSC, "Nigeria and the Battle Against Boko Haram: Why Has the Militant Group Not Been Defeated?", (Published on 15/8/2017), Available online at [http://othersolutions.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/1708\\_OSC\\_Nigeria-and-the-Battle-Against-Boko-Haram.pdf](http://othersolutions.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/1708_OSC_Nigeria-and-the-Battle-Against-Boko-Haram.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> RFI, "Boko Haram: la branche d'al-Barnawi «mieux organisée» que celle de Shekau", Available online at <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170805-nigeria-boko-haram-abu-musab-al-banawi-etat-islamique-malte-liewerscheidt> (Accessed on 25/8/2017).

<sup>12</sup> Newsweek, "What We Know About Boko Haram's Factional War", Available online at <http://www.newsweek.com/boko-haram-isis-abubakar-shekau-abu-musab-al-barnawi-496615> (Accessed on 22/8/2017).

<sup>13</sup> The Cable, "In new video, Boko Haram factional leader predicts Shekau's defeat", Available online at <https://www.thecable.ng/just-new-video-boko-haram-factional-leader-predicts-shekaus-defeat> (Accessed on 30/8/2017).