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Last Words of Abubakar Shekau: A Testament in the Politics of Jihadi Extraversion

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Abstract

The last audio put out by Nigerian jihadi leader Abubakar Shekau before his death is a rare source, distinct from his usual public propaganda. Addressed to internal jihadi audiences, it sheds light on a number of key aspects, from the events that led to his death to the political economy of plunder, a key issue in Shekau's jihad. Its most interesting takeaway, however, is about the relation between a local jihadi organisation and the global jihadi structures of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. It illustrates Shekau's complex and ultimately unsuccessful strategies of extraversion—using the appeal and resources of global jihad while trying to contain its demands.

Keywords: Jihadism, Nigeria, Boko Haram, insurgency, Islamic State, Al-Qaeda.

Résumé

Les dernières paroles d'Abubakar Shekau : un témoignage sur la politique d'extraversion djihadiste

Le dernier enregistrement diffusé par le chef djihadiste nigérian Abubakar Shekau juste avant sa mort est une source rare, bien différente de ses enregistrements de propagande habituels. Destiné à différents publics djihadistes, il éclaire un certain nombre de points importants, des événements qui ont amené à la mort de Shekau jusqu'à la question de l'économie politique du pillage, un aspect central dans le djihad de Shekau. Mais le point le plus important sur lequel cet enregistrement est utile est celui qui concerne les relations entre une organisation djihadiste locale et des structures djihadistes globales comme Al-Qaïda et l'État islamique. Il éclaire ainsi les stratégies d'extraversion complexes, et finalement infructueuses de Shekau, ses tentatives pour utiliser l'écho et les ressources du djihad global tout en essayant d'en contenir les exigences.

Mots-clés : djihadisme, Nigeria, Boko Haram, rébellion, État islamique, Al-Qaïda.

Resumo

As últimas palavras de Abubakar Shekau: um testemunho na política de extroversão dos jihadistas

A última gravação difundida pelo chefe jihadista nigeriano Abubakar Shekau imediatamente antes da sua morte é uma fonte rara, bastante diferente das suas gravações de propaganda habituais. Destinada a diferentes públicos jihadistas, esclarece um certo número de pontos importantes, desde os acontecimentos que levaram à morte de Shekau até à questão da economia política da pilhagem, aspecto central da jihad de Shekau. Mas o ponto mais importante da utilidade desta gravação incide sobre as relações entre uma organização jihadista local e as estruturas jihadistas globais como Al-Qaeda e o Estado Islâmico. Ilumina assim as estratégias de extroversão complexas, e finalmente infrutíferas de Shekau, as suas tentativas para utilizar as ressonâncias e os recursos da jihad global, tentando ao mesmo tempo conter as suas exigências.

Palavras-chave: jihadismo, Nigéria, Boko Haram, rebelião, Estado Islâmico, Al-Qaeda.

Last Words of Abubakar Shekau

A Testament in the Politics of Jihadi Extraversion

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Dataset related to this article: “Last Words of Abubakar Shekau: A Testament in the Politics of Jihadi Extraversion,” <https://doi.org/10.34847/nkl.cf51nwx5>.

This data consists of two mp3 audio files (14 mn 09 s and 14 mn 26 s), featuring the last recording released by Nigerian jihadist leader Abubakar Shekau before his death (19-05-2021), in Hausa language, and the English translation of the content of the recording (RTF and ODT format). This translation is also reproduced at the end of the article.

The jihadi insurgency that has been rocking the northeast of Nigeria since 2009 under the exonym “Boko Haram” is a hotly debated and popular topic for academics and security analysts.¹ The formation of the movement under Mohamed Yusuf in the early 2000s, Yusuf’s brutally suppressed uprising and his death in 2009, the re-emergence of the movement as insurgency under the designation *ḡamā’at Ahl al-Sunna li-Da’wa wa-l-Jihād* (“People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad,” JASDJ) under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau from 2010, Shekau’s pledge to the Islamic State in 2015, which saw JASDJ becoming the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), the 2016 split which saw dissenters under Habib Yusuf carry away the ISWAP flag while Shekau floated anew the JASDJ designation, have all brought about a mind-boggling amount of publications (for an introduction to Boko Haram, see Thurston 2018; and Kendhammer and McCain 2018). This abundance is all the more mind-boggling as it is often not matched by the availability and/or the mobilisation of primary sources (Dele-Adedeji 2021). A large portion of the publications, especially from the field of political science, is based on the rehashing of secondary sources, academic articles, publications by think tanks or interviews with usually unnamed and often Abuja-based diplomats, scholars, security officials and security analysts. Reading the footnoting of many publications, it is hard to escape the impression that much of the scholarship on Boko Haram is circular, self-referencing gnosis with limited access to first-hand material.

The most solid literature combines macro-historical data with an exploration of the timeline constructed from press reports and the treatment of a variety of jihadi documents, usually of a public nature—theological treatises, preaches, videos or

1. “Boko Haram,” which is generally translated from Hausa as “Western education is forbidden,” is a derisive designation used by critics of the group, now in wide use both locally and globally. I use the term here to designate the organisation before the 2016 split and to discuss jointly the two factions that formed out of the 2016 split. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers and to Alessio Iocchi for their feedback on this paper.

press releases (Mohammed 2014; Thurston 2018; Kendhammer and McCain 2018). Some researchers have used a variety of data bases of violent incidents to identify patterns and changes (Pearson and Zenn 2021; Warner and Lizzo 2021). Others have tried to complement these sources with rare official documents, including Wikileaks documents and a few internal jihadi documents made available ex post facto by the United States authorities or by jihadi apologists (Thurston 2018; Zenn 2020; Brigaglia & Iocchi 2020). So far, while some research has mobilised interviews with victims or former captives of Boko Haram, or civilians who have otherwise interacted with the movement (Cohen 2015; Higazi 2015; Köhler 2021), few publications have been based on interviews with people more closely associated to the movement, particularly current or former members (among the notable exceptions, see Mercy Corps 2016; Matfess 2017; Equal Access 2018; Bukarti 2020; and Foucher 2020²).

Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (2018) has thoughtfully alerted that an exclusive reliance on jihadi “propaganda” sources carried along a number of biases, notably an excessive emphasis on the ideological, religious and international dimensions of jihad. He has also insisted on the problem of the authenticity of certain documents. But what is “propaganda,” exactly? There is certainly a difference between a two-minute video showing an attack on a Nigerian army base at the tune of religious chanting and an hour-long audio discussion of theology-cum-policy by a senior jihadi leader. Some “propaganda”—visual, short—is largely an attempt to reach out, beyond the organisation. But other types of “propaganda”—longer written or audio formats—is for internal consumption. It circulates on secretive and select channels on Telegram, or is passed around locally from phone to phone via Bluetooth or Whatsapp. It is not supposed to be accessed by non-members but it can circulate quite intensively, at least among its primary jihadi audience, contrary to what Pérouse de Montclos (2018, 160) seems to assume. It forms part of intense ongoing arguments between the factions within Boko Haram, arguments in which very politic considerations come mixed with a demonstrative concern for religious liceity—even while one should not make religion and ideology the key to everything Boko Haram, it remains that, as Thurston (2018, 8) has put it, “Boko Haram’s leaders and followers appear to care a lot about religious ideas.” While even the first type of propaganda can bring results, particularly when analysed serially (Apard 2015; Zenn 2020b), the second sort is of even greater interest. The present piece provides a translation and commentary to one particularly remarkable audio, the unintended testament that Abubakar Shekau, the leader of JASDJ since

2. This latter type of publications has often been based on research carried out in close connection with non-governmental organisations and think tanks which have the resources and do not suffer from the same risk-aversion as universities. While Duffield (2010; 2014) is certainly right to point out the mounting risk-aversion in the NGO world, symbolised by the fortified compound, and to the problematic knowledge that derives from this, universities from the Global North now seem even more risk-averse than the international NGOs, and the latter’s fortified compounds have become a major stop for the academics who are able to go beyond the timidity of their research institution.

2009, recorded on 18 May, shortly before his brutal death. In an unexpected push into Shekau's stronghold in the Sambisa forest, ISWAP had cornered him and was pressing him to surrender. On 18 or 19 May 2021, soon after releasing that audio, Shekau, who had been wearing a suicide jacket, blew himself up.³

I received the full audio on 23 May from a contact who has access to some of the selective social media platforms channels where ISWAP and JASDJ associates and supporters interact. For safety reasons, I cannot discuss the identity of that contact nor the nature of my connection to him. The full audio is about 28 minute-long. It is thus much longer and has a lot more to say than the 2-minute version quickly released by the influential news Nigerian website Humangle⁴ (Abdullah 2021). The full version has since been made independently available to all on the website of Jacob Zenn, a scholar of Boko Haram who has created a precious repository of primary and secondary sources, jihadi and else, on Boko Haram as a companion website (unmaskingbokoharam.com) to his book about the movement (Zenn 2020a). The translation was prepared by a Maiduguri-based collaborator with whom I have been working a long time. He is a native Hausa-speaker but not a professional translator, and I have consolidated his draft in discussion with him and with two reviewers with whom I shared the audio, two Hausa-speaking security analysts based in Borno with direct expertise in the conflict.

For scholars researching Boko Haram, documents produced primarily for the internal jihadi consumption still come relatively rare.⁵ This is particularly true of Shekau, who had made a name for himself for the garrulous but content-poor videos he put for an international audience, rambling on, shooting machine guns, challenging the Nigerian authorities and threatening to kill Barack Obama. More recently, he had grown more mellow, producing audios and videos in which he restated his creed and principles in general terms, but still said very little about the past or the present of the jihadi movement.⁶ Shekau's last audio is different. In it, for almost 30 minutes, he tried to justify himself to his jihadi audience. More exactly, he seemed to be trying to address several jihadi audiences—his own fighters and supporters, his ISWAP adversaries, and the Islamic State itself. This variety in audiences shows in the language choices he made. He recorded the first audio on Monday 17 May in Kanuri, yet another clue of the fact that Boko Haram has been indeed primarily a thing from Borno State, where the ethnic Kanuri are a relative majority and Kanuri

3. All the former associates of JASDJ and ISWAP that I have talked to and who still have some access to the one or the other faction agree over this. Shekau reportedly killed a few ISWAP members who had come to parlay with him.

4. It is not known whether Humangle received an abridged version and released it, or if Humangle edited the audio.

5. The major archive of translated Boko Haram documents is Kassim and Nwankpa (2018), a crucial resource for researchers. A large majority of the Boko Haram material it contains was released for public consumption, not for internal purposes.

6. All known media productions of Shekau in 2020 and 2021 can be accessed on Jacob Zenn's website www.unmaskingbokoharam.com.

is one of the *lingua franca*, spoken well beyond the Kanuri community itself. Then on Tuesday 18 May, Shekau recorded the Hausa version which is translated below. In it, he announces a version in Arabic (“I will soon deliver this message in the Arabic language for the whole world to hear”). No Arabic version was released, however. It seems Shekau died before it was recorded or released.

Shekau’s last address matters more than his previous recent addresses because in it, he was re-joining for what turned out to be one final time a virulent longstanding controversy between people who had known one another very well and have had a full decade to argue. Shekau’s contribution happened under stress, in a context of urgency, it was oral and immediate. As Shekau himself makes clear, he had just been under attack in his camp in the Sambisa forest when he recorded it. In this very special context, he mentioned a number of important things about the circumstances past and present of the jihadi struggle in Nigeria.

In the present piece, I want to discuss three questions that I find particularly interesting and original about the document—there are certainly other possible takeaways.⁷ First of all, the audio sheds some light on the immediate circumstances of Shekau’s death and allows for a better understanding of the current dynamics in the jihadi insurgency in the Northeast of Nigeria. But beyond this immediate situation, the present document matters, more decisively perhaps, because in this very specific context, with death lurking by, Shekau went over a number of key points about the trajectory of jihad in Nigeria. These are the second and third points that I want to discuss below.

The second point, which is a passing but telling allusion in Shekau’s speech, will be discussed only briefly. It has to do with the role of *ghanima* (war booty), a central aspect of the political economy of Boko Haram, but a topic poorly understood even while it has been a key factor in the recurring internal tensions of which the death of Shekau is just the latest episode.⁸

The third point, which will be discussed at greater length, has to do with the respective parts of local and global factors in the formation and development of Boko Haram. Most scholars researching Boko Haram acknowledge both aspects, of course, but they often differ significantly in the attention and the explanatory power that they grant to each set of factors. While addressing the globalised context of Boko Haram, Alex Thurston (2018), Kyari Mohammed (2018), Abdul Raufu Mustapha (2014) and Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (2016) have all insisted, in various ways, on the fundamentally local factors of the conflict—Nigeria’s special history of violence, impunity and tense ethnoreligious federalism, its combination of poverty and inequality, the context of political liberalisation of the late 1990s, the competing trends in Nigerian Islam, the distinctive characteristics of Borno State,

7. For instance, I deliberately neglect the theological dimension of the dispute between JASDJ and ISWAP, which Shekau discusses. On this, however, he is only rehashing old themes.

8. For instance, neither the word *ghanima* nor its various translations (booty, loot) figure in the indexes of influential volumes dedicated to Boko Haram such as Kassim and Nwankpa (2018), Thurston (2018) or Zenn (2020a).

a state in the northeast of the Nigerian federation where Boko Haram bloomed. Jacob Zenn (2020a) has argued that this line of analysis, dominant in academia, has underestimated the role of global factors. Beyond the influence of a variety of political trends in global Islam, he has set out to demonstrate the role of Al-Qaeda at key turning points in the trajectory of Boko Haram. Exploring another global angle, Brigaglia and Iocchi (2020) have insisted on the mutually reinforcing impact of global jihad and the global war on terror. The debate has raged, and has certainly been complicated by the paucity of sources, which has resulted in a sub-debate on the use of sources: how does one operate when one has only a few clues, sometimes of suspicious origins? Zenn has suggested that thorough mining could yield enough clues to employ what he calls an “abductive” method and produce an “interpretation,” a hypothetical and temporary reconstruction (Zenn 2020, 11-14). To be fair, all social sciences are fundamentally interpretative and are always producing temporary reconstructions, using conditionals and hypotheticals. And critics have argued Zenn was not prudent enough in the choice and handling of his sources, and pushed his interpretations too far (Higazi *et alii* 2018). One way out of this deadlock is of course more clues. And Shekau gives crucial details in the document discussed here that, when combined with other recent acquisitions in data, allow to develop a more grounded approach, which may contribute to an exit from the local vs. global dead-end.

ISWAP triumphant?

In his audio, Shekau gives a number of elements that confirm and clarify the course of events that led to his death. First of all, even while he tellingly never names ISWAP, Shekau confirms that enemy combatants had recently arrived into his zone of control in the Sambisa Forest. He says that a serious battle took place which “resulted in the death and injuries of many of [his] brothers.” He also insists that the adversary was “using people in [their] midst.”

Shekau also mentions that ISWAP did not come only with blazing guns but claimed to offer him a settlement, pressing him to pledge allegiance to the current Caliph of the Islamic State, whom Shekau designates as “Abu Ibrahim” (the Caliph’s full name is Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi).⁹ According to Shekau, ISWAP even said that if he pledged allegiance, he could be acknowledged as *wali* (governor) of “the whole African continent.”¹⁰ There is no such *wali*-ship in the current Islamic State structure, and there is no knowing if the hyperbole was ISWAP’s or Shekau’s. ISWAP officials have on a variety of occasions insisted that erring jihadi who repented sincerely

9. Shekau had pledged allegiance to Abu Ibrahim’s predecessor, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, and had never withdrawn that pledge. But a pledge is always a personal matter, and it dies with the death of the one or the other party. Mentioning ISWAP’s offer, Shekau confirms that after Al-Baghdadi’s death in 2019, he had not pledged allegiance to Abu Ibrahim.

10. It is typical of the Islamic State’s pretence to statehood that it does not designate chiefs (*emir*) or religious leaders (*imam*) to head its affiliates but governors (*wali*).

for their failing and demonstrated their loyalty to the Caliph could be accepted back into the community and even regain their leadership positions.¹¹ Already at the time of the 2016 split, dissenters had said that they would submit to Shekau if he acknowledged his mistakes and obeyed the Caliph (Kassim and Nwankpa 2018, 464). If such an offer was made, it is likely the offer was mere rhetoric, on the part of ISWAP at least, if not also on the part of the Islamic State. ISWAP had long been much more hostile to Shekau than the Islamic State itself (Foucher 2020). There is a lot of bad blood between ISWAP and Shekau, and ISWAP leaders had engaged in virulent attacks against him, while the Islamic State has never once condemned Shekau publicly. One of the most notable ISWAP attacks on Shekau is a lengthy essay published in 2018, *Cutting out the Tumour*, the eponymous tumour being Shekau himself (for the Arabic text, an English translation and a commentary, see al-Tamimi 2018; and, for additional commentary, Brigaglia 2018). Among other things, Shekau was denounced as an extremist (*khawarij*) prone to an over-generous use of *takfir*, the discounting of other Muslims as unbelievers, justifying their killing. The authors of that indictment were two of the surviving sons of Boko Haram's founder Mohamed Yusuf, one of them in all likelihood Habib Yusuf, who had led the 2016 split and had taken over from Shekau as ISWAP's *wali* in the region. Habib Yusuf had lost his command in 2019, but in May 2021, he had just returned as the *ad interim* leader of ISWAP and was leading the charge against Shekau.¹² Given this history, the chances are that ISWAP cared little about Shekau's fate but offered him a way out either to placate the Islamic State (the question of the relation of JASDJ and ISWAP to the Islamic State is discussed in greater details below) or to send a conciliatory signal to Shekau's supporters.

Shekau was clearly overwhelmed by ISWAP's sudden push and the lack of resistance of a number of his men. When he recorded this audio, his only apparent hope, expressed in the audio, was that the Caliph himself realise that he had been fooled by ISWAP: "I still believe that the Caliph is not fully briefed about my Islamic views." He was reiterating a claim made on a number of occasions: that Habib Yusuf and his associates, who had been the intermediaries between him and the Caliph before the 2016 split, had misrepresented his position to the Caliph (Zenn 2020a, 280). It was by now too late. The only exit that Shekau found was a suicide-bomb.

Shekau's last words give a sense of his desperation vis-à-vis ISWAP's powerful political and military machine. Indeed, while ISWAP had been the underdog at the time of the split in 2016, with dissenters running for cover to Lake Chad, pursued by Shekau fighters, it reformed, partly thanks to the assistance of the Islamic State,

11. Only a few weeks before, ISWAP's returned leader Habib Yusuf similarly insisted that the *wali* whom he had just replaced at the head of ISWAP might regain his position if he repented truly and submitted to the authority of the Caliph. The full audio is available at <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2021/05/18/iswap-abu-musab-al-barnawi-leadership-reinstatement-audio-may-2021/> [archive]. For a discussion, see @VincentFoucher, May 11, 2021: <https://twitter.com/VincentFoucher/status/1392036614835146756> [archive].

12. Habib Yusuf discusses that issue in the audio referred in footnote 11.

and rapidly emerged as the most solid jihadi force in the Lake Chad Basin, putting a formidable challenge to the Nigerian Army (Foucher 2020). ISWAP even beat the Army to defeating Shekau.

More than a month after Shekau's death, on 22 June, in a long address to the global jihadi community, an Islamic State spokesperson congratulated ISWAP for having brought an end to the division caused by the *khawarij* (Al-Tamimi 2021). By then, Amaq, the Islamic State media branch, had already claimed at least four attacks against government forces in the name of ISWAP in areas that had hitherto been under JASDJ control.¹³ Things however soon appeared more complex than ISWAP's blitz into the Sambisa forest had initially led many—including myself—to think.

Right after Shekau's death, ISWAP tried to rally his men, and met with mixed results. ISWAP initiated discussions with surviving JASDJ commanders over matters of doctrine and according to a brief audio account of the conversations that circulated among JASDJ associates, 18 out of 20 JASDJ subgroups reached an agreement on doctrine with ISWAP.¹⁴ But two JASDJ subgroups, including a powerful one based on the northern part of Lake, at the border between Chad and Niger, under the command of Bakura Doro, were raising issues about two classic bones of contention that had opposed Shekau and his critics at the time of the 2016 split: the treatment of non-affiliated Muslim civilians, an issue amply discussed in Shekau's last audio, and the possession of identity documents issued by states deemed un-Islamic. The Bakura group launched at least one attack against ISWAP communities in early June, and later in June, in a short Arabic-language video, the top-ranking cleric of Bakura Doro's group, Bakura Sahalaba, denounced ISWAP while calling for a fair arbitration by the Islamic State, indicating both the persisting prestige attached to the Caliphate and an opening for negotiations.¹⁵

Either negotiations did not happen or they floundered, and there has since been more combat between the two groups. In one such fights with the Bakura group in August, Habib Yusuf himself was reportedly wounded, possibly mortally¹⁶ (Baba, phone interview 2021; Ali, phone interview 2021). In other parts of Shekau's former domain, ISWAP and bands of former Shekau fighters have fought each other (Agence

13. The attacks in question were in Komdi (Damboa Local Government Area, LGA) on 15 June, Kumshe (Bama LGA) and Lawanti (Konduga LGA) on 20 June, and Mayanti (Bama LGA) on 21 June.

14. Audio recording in the possession of the author. For a discussion, see @VincentFoucher, May 27, 2021: <https://twitter.com/VincentFoucher/status/1397912974598180864> [archive].

15. Video recording in the possession of the author. For a discussion, see @VincentFoucher, June 14, 2021: <https://twitter.com/VincentFoucher/status/1404504665753018368> [archive]. According to a former member of the Bakura group, after the death of Shekau, Bakura gave over the leadership to Sahalaba, acknowledging his superior religious knowledge (Hassan, phone interview 2021).

16. The Nigerian military recently announced Yusuf's death, but did not claim it for themselves, a sign that they saw it as an intra-jihadi kill (British Broadcasting Corporation 2021). One source insisted however that Yusuf was not dead, but seriously wounded and incapacitated (Ali, phone interview 2021).

France Presse 2021; Musa, phone interview 2021). Others, including notable Shekau commanders Alhaji Ali and Abba Tukur, left the Sambisa forest to join Bakura, sometimes having to fight their way through ISWAP lines (Usman, phone interview 2021; Musa, phone interview 2021; Baba, phone interview 2021). Others chose to surrender to the Nigerian authorities, encouraged by the promise of demobilisation and reintegration, rather than submit to ISWAP (Samuel *et alii* 2021; Anyadike 2021).

Reforming jihad: the nagging question of *ghanima*

In his testament, Shekau mentions briefly a very important issue, that of *ghanima*, war booty. He mentions it in a brief list of what he says are “false claims” that his ISWAP critics have been levelling against him—that he was not sharing the war booty with the common jihadi. Interestingly, a few days before, in the audio that he released upon his return as a caretaker leader for ISWAP, Shekau’s nemesis Habib Yusuf had also mentioned the question of *ghanima*.¹⁷ In both cases, the mention is brief, but that the same notion figures in two major audios by major jihadi leaders in Borno at key moments is in itself an indication of the importance of the issue, an issue about which the literature is notably poor.

According to jihadi interpretations of Quranic rules, four fifths of *ghanima*, the booty seized in combat, must be shared among the combatants and commanders involved in the fighting, and one fifth accrues to the jihadi organisation. The wealth and goods seized from “unbelievers” without combat (*fey’u*), which Shekau does not discuss here, are supposed to accrue to the organisation in their entirety, and fighters are not allowed to keep any of these. *Ghanima* matters, because in the absence of a wage system, it is a major source of income for fighters in Boko Haram factions.¹⁸ And controversies over *ghanima* and *fey’u* have long been central in the internal politics of Boko Haram, resulting in all sorts of conflicts. If taking part to attacks is the main way to get material rewards, who gets to go on an operation and who does not? What is the fair price the organisation should pay for the loot? Can the organisation compound fighters and mid-ranking commanders to sell their share *ghanima*, which includes strategic resources like weapons, vehicles and fuel? Is there not a risk that commanders who keep their share of the loot will autonomise themselves from the leadership? And what happens if the command takes the loot, and pays only part of the expected compensation? On and on, for both JASDJ and ISWAP, the management of *ghanima* has created problems. Thus, according to one interviewee, Shekau organised for the killing of a noted commander who had set out

17. See @VincentFoucher, May 11, 2021: <https://twitter.com/VincentFoucher/status/1392036614835146756> [archive]. The audio is available at <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2021/05/18/iswap-abu-musab-al-barnawi-leadership-reinstatement-audio-may-2021/>.

18. Heeding to the advice of the IS, soon after the 2016 breakaway from Shekau, ISWAP set out to pay wages to its fighters, just like the IS did at the peak of its power in Iraq and Syria. It was attempted by at least portions of ISWAP for a month, found impractical and dropped by the ISWAP leadership (Ali, phone interview 2020).

to create his own arsenal (Ali, phone interview 2020; see also al-Tamimi 2018). Later, during the 2016 split, dissenters explicitly accused Shekau of hoarding the loot and leaving commanders he did not favour with little armament (Kassim and Nwankpa 2018, 458-462). *Ghanima* remains a major issue for Nigerian jihadi organisations, and Shekau's testament, even in his attempt to deny the mismanagement of loot, attests to that.

The local/global debate, episode 1: Shekau and Al Qaeda

One of the audio's highpoints is certainly Shekau's discussion of his relation to Al-Qaeda, a topic of much controversy among scholars. Shekau's testament contributes to confirming that the relation was real enough, and did have a material dimension, but then also that it petered out fairly easily.

In what is a welcome confirmation, Shekau says that he did pay allegiance to Al-Qaeda. It was known from a document seized at Ben Laden's compound in Abbottabad that he had inquired about joining Al-Qaeda, and I had heard from former Boko Haram associates that he had pledged, but it is useful to have Shekau's word on what had remained a debated point.¹⁹ If Shekau's claim is true, it happened sometime between his assumption of the leadership after the July 2009 uprising and January 2012, before Al-Qaeda broke paths with him and regrouped a small group of more dependable internationalised Nigerian jihadi into forming a new movement, *Jamaat Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan* (also known as *Ansaru*). While allegiance is always pledged to a person, not to an organisation, Shekau does not say whether he pledged to Ben Laden or to Abdelmalek Droukdel, the emir of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Al Qaeda branch that was operating from the Algeria-Mali border and which served as a relay between Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram, as had been mentioned by Guidère (2011). One interviewee seems to confirm the latter hypothesis, as he insists that Shekau pledged « to an Algerian guy » (Ibrahim, phone interview 2021).

Shekau also mentions that he received 50 million Nairas from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). This too is a welcome confirmation. There again, AQIM sources discuss the project of such a transfer, notably a July 2010 correspondence in which Abdelmalek Droukdel, the emir of AQIM, orders Abu Zeid, one of his subalterns, to provide an equivalent sum in euros (200,000 euros) to Shekau (Thurston 2018, 165). In a subsequent letter, Shekau had expressed his gratitude to Abu Zeid,

19. Pérouse de Montclos (2015, 111) had dismissed the notion of such an allegiance. On the Abbottabad document, see Zenn (2020a, 153). I was told of Shekau's pledge by several former Boko Haram fighters and by a Malian journalist who has interviewed members of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Ibrahim, phone interview 2021; Cissé, phone interview 2021). When later pushed to declare his loyalty to the Islamic State, Shekau delayed pledging, arguing notably that he had already pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda. At one point, he claimed that he would only pledge allegiance if he met the Caliph in person (Kolo, interview 2019; Bana, phone interview 2020). In his testament, Shekau insists that he had pledged allegiance immediately, possibly in an attempt to answer criticisms about his delaying tactics.

but it was not clear that it was about money—it could have been about training provided to Boko Haram members (Zenn 2020a, 156). We now know the money was indeed received. We also know it caused a bit of stir, though it is not completely clear why. Shekau says: “When they insisted that I should handover the money to them to carry out Islamic duties, I declined, reminding them that I am the leader and as such I am the one who is supposed to be in custody of the money, and this became a serious issue between us.” Zenn (2020a, 154-155) formulates the hypothesis that the money was probably a sort of reward for the involvement of Nigerian jihadis in an AQIM hostage-taking in Mauritania, and that some AQIM officials were not happy that the money went out to a distant organisation. If one is to believe Shekau, it seems Nigerian jihadi more strongly connected to Al-Qaeda and AQIM than Shekau, possibly connected to those Nigerians integrated in AQIM units in the Sahel and Sahara, also had alternative views about how to use the money. Describing these views in his testament, Shekau is very generic, talking about “Islamic duties.” This seems congruent with other sources which make clear that while Shekau wanted to embark head on into jihad in Nigeria, Al-Qaeda recommended a long-term approach, considering that Nigeria was not ready for jihad, and insisted on the need for preparatory work through *da’wa*, predication.²⁰

Shekau insists on the role of a man he calls Uqba or ibn Uqba. He says that Uqba was the man he “used to send to Mali” and then that Uqba went “again” to Mali. This means Uqba acted as a middleman between Shekau and AQIM on several occasions. One interviewee mentions that Uqba was instrumental in Shekau’s pledge of allegiance to an AQIM leader (Ibrahim, phone interview 2021). Uqba—Ibrahim Uqba al-Muhajir—is an important if little known figure. Interviews with former associates of Boko Haram allow to flesh out his portrait a bit. Uqba was reportedly from an ethnic Shuwa Arab or a Fulani family from Maiduguri (Khadija, interview 2020). His family had settled at some point in Saudi Arabia and was deported back to Borno, though it is not clear when this deportation happened and what time Uqba spent in Saudi Arabia, if any²¹ (Khadija, interview 2020). One interviewee also recalls that two of Uqba’s brothers were part of the so-called Nigerian Taleban (Khadija, interview 2020), a group of Maiduguri-based jihad-inclined young militants, often from middle-class background, dissatisfied with Mohamed Yusuf’s moderation at the time, left to create a militant community by the Niger border and were brutally suppressed by the Nigerian authorities in 2003-2004 (on the Nigerian Taleban,

20. AQIM was trying to preserve its immediate interests, and insisted that not all Nigerian fighters it would train in the Sahel would go back to Nigeria. See for instance Brigaglia and Iocchi (2020).

21. The precise signification of Uqba’s nickname, “Al-Muhajir,” is uncertain. In Arabic, it can mean “migrant,” and may thus be an allusion to the Saudi part of Uqba’s personal history. Alternatively, as Bukarti (2020) notes, the Nigerian Taleban were called the *muhajirun*, in reference of the flight of Prophet Muhammad to Medina, so the nickname may allude to Uqba’s connection to that group. Also, in the jihadi world, *muhajir* can designate those who have migrated from their place of birth to join a distant jihadi front.

see Bukarti 2020). According to Zenn (2020c, 125), Uqba may have been part of the Nigerian Taleban himself. According to Zenn (2020c, 125), he may have been involved in the 2007 killing of Sheikh Jaafar Adam, a leading Salafi scholar who had been closely associated with those who went on to create the Nigerian Taleban and Boko Haram before distancing himself starkly after 9/11.

Four interviewees mention that Uqba spent time in Somalia for military training (Bana, interview 2019; Ali, phone interview 2020; Suleiman, interview 2019; Khadija, phone interview 2021), two of which insist that he was sent to train with the Shebab of Somalia by Mohamed Yusuf himself, before the 2009 uprising, which would be another indication that Yusuf, whom the Nigerian Taleban had judged soft in the early 2000s, eventually went on the warpath and tried to develop a combat capacity.²² Another interviewee mentions that Uqba trained in the Sahel with AQIM, but that may be the result of a confusion with his trips to the Sahel as a messenger (Kolo, interview 2020; see also Zenn 2020c). Uqba was abroad at the time of the 2009 clashes and came back to Maiduguri in 2010 or in 2011 (Suleiman, interview 2019; Khadija, phone interview 2021). It was then that he served as a messenger between Shekau and AQIM. He became one of JASDJ's first military instructors and he founded the "Fallujah" training camp in the borough of Bulabulin, near Maiduguri (Suleiman, interview 2020). He was subsequently part of the instructors and commanders when Boko Haram developed its military wing in the Sambisa forest. One major site there is still called Uqba to this day.²³ Uqba attained one of the top ranks in JASDJ, that of *amir ul fiya* and he died in September 2014, during an attack on the town of Bama²⁴ (Kolo, interview 2019; Zenn 2020a, 243).

I am taking some time here to develop what information I have been able to gather so far on the biography of Uqba not just because very little is known about the biographies of Nigerian jihadi militants beyond Mohamed Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau (and even then...). Uqba is interesting because both Shekau's mention and what we know about him confirm that there was indeed a small corps of globalised and experienced jihadi that was connecting Nigerian jihad and global jihad in a very real way, in much the same way as it is now clear that there was indeed some real money coming from global jihadi organisations to the local jihadi scenes. While a number of scholars have doubted the significance and sometimes even the reality of JASDJ's connections to global jihad, these connections were significant and

22. Perhaps because Uqba had spent so much time abroad and spoke foreign languages, including good Arabic, one former Boko Haram associate said he thought Uqba was a foreigner, maybe a Somalian (Aliyu, interview 2020). One source insists that while Uqba spoke Hausa, he spoke no Kanuri, and concludes that he was not from Borno (Ali, phone interview 2020). But one source, who is familiar with his family, is adamant that his family is indeed from Maiduguri (Khadija, interview 2020; and phone interview 2021).

23. According to Parkinson and Hinshaw (2021, 193), the "Chibok girls" of global fame were detained in Uqba for a time.

24. Uqba was eulogized in a video released in October 2019 by JASDJ, available at the following address: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/10/17/boko-haram-there-is-no-glory-except-jihad-video-october-15-2019/>. He can be seen at 5:53.

foundational in various ways: men like Uqba did rise to prominence within JASDJ because of their military experience, something which was a rarity in the movement in its early days, and they trained the first generation of militants. This is not to say that JASDJ did not source capacity and resources through other channels than the networks of global jihad—when it comes to combat skills, for instance, other types of access played a part too. Thus, another leading early JASDJ commander was Mustafa “Chad,” a former Chadian rebel fighter who sold weapons to JASDJ and then joined, soon followed by a number of experienced Chadian fighters (Suleiman, interview 2020). He too played a key part in developing the military apparatus of JASDJ.²⁵ Acknowledging the part played by globalised jihadi in the development of Boko Haram does not mean that they called the shots in Nigeria in the name of Al-Qaeda, nor that the jihad in Nigeria was decided or led by Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan, Yemen or Mali. But there is no doubt that global jihadi organisations, sometimes knowingly and sometimes not, have fed the imagination and have contributed to developing the capacity of jihadis in Nigeria.

While Ben Laden himself had recognised early on the potential for jihad in Nigeria, a country with a strong religious divide, Al-Qaeda proved skeptic towards short-term prospects and insisted that the priority should be *da’wa*, predication.²⁶ It seems that Al-Qaeda operatives mostly wanted to use Nigeria to procure money, weapons and men to take to other fronts.²⁷ At best did they investigate the possibility of targeting Western interests in Nigeria—not the Nigerian state itself. Al-Qaeda did not push for, nor help, Boko Haram’s uprising of 2009, though they did provide some support after that. Shekau certainly fed Al-Qaeda’s scepticism: he was seen as uncontrollable and reckless, declaring large numbers of Muslims, jihadi or not, to be unbelievers and justifying gruesome violence against them. As mentioned above, Al-Qaeda eventually decided in early 2012 to back a small group of the more dependable internationalised Nigerian jihadi to form a new movement, Ansaru, with a mission to operate elsewhere in the north of Nigeria. The attempt was short-lived, however: outside of Borno State where Mohamed Yusuf’s savvy preaching and networking had created a real social base to draw upon, the jihadi were much less well-rooted elsewhere. Under the twin pressure of the security forces and Shekau, Ansaru crumbled. From the end of 2013, it stopped claiming operations for years, though it seems to have survived in a degraded and discrete form.

25. He was the commander whom Shekau eventually killed because he had begun using *ghanima* to develop his own arsenal, discussed above. As Marielle Debos (2016) has aptly demonstrated, the gun has become a lifestyle in Chad, and a number of Chadian men live by the gun, sometimes government soldiers, sometimes rebels, sometimes bandits, sometimes customs officers... and sometimes mercenaries in neighbouring wars.

26. On Ben Laden’s early interest in Nigeria, see Kendhammer and McCain (2018, 29).

27. In that, Al-Qaeda was merely mirroring the initial strategy of its Algerian affiliates as described by Skretting (2020): they had explored Mali, Niger and Mauritania in order to mobilise resources for the Algerian jihad and over time, the failure of jihad in Algeria and the mounting presence of Sahelian jihadis saw the jihadi networks begin to train their guns towards the Sahelian states.

Not all the internationalised Nigerian jihadi went along with Ansaru, however. Uqba and several others stayed with Shekau. Another case in point is Aliyu al-Gombewi, also known as Abu Hanissa, an ethnic Fulani from Gombe State, who had trained in the Sahel with AQIM. Aliyu eventually became the *amir ul jaysh* of Boko Haram, its “chief of the army,” top military commander (Kolo, interview 2019). According to Shekau’s testament, Al-Qaeda actually sent a parting letter via a jihadi “brother” who came from Yemen to Mali²⁸ (it is not clear if it was sent before or after the creation of Ansaru). The letter mentioned “a serious crisis in Al-Qaeda” (could it be a fallout of the death of Ben Laden in May 2011?), insisting that Shekau should do what he thinks right and “forget about Al-Qaeda,” a polite but clear dismissal: Al-Qaeda had more urgent matters to address. And so Shekau, as he says himself, did just that: he “forgot about Al-Qaeda.” This distancing did not stop the ascent of Shekau’s organisation, which reached its peak influence later, in 2014, with Uqba and Aliyu key operators in that ascent. While Al-Qaeda certainly contributed to developing the capacity of Boko Haram, it was never in a position to impose much on Shekau. The global connections could thus be real enough, significant, formative and... yet essentially opportunistic and ultimately dispensable. Criticising what he calls the “paradigm of the yoke,” the sense that the trajectory of African states and societies are determined from outside, Jean-François Bayart (2000) has suggested that it was essential to acknowledge the agency, the capacity of African actors for extraversion, their ability to make dependency on outside resources work for their local preoccupations.

The local/global debate, episode 2: Shekau and the Islamic State

In his relationship with the Islamic State, over time, Shekau became less forgetful and more cautious—after the years of success from 2010 to 2014, probably he learnt some humility from the counter-offensive of the Nigerian state and its allies in 2015-2016 and the split of 2016. He tried to navigate the relation more subtly, though ultimately with little success.

Particularly striking in Shekau’s testament is his appeal to the Caliph, mentioned above, even as the Caliph’s soldiers were hounding him through the Sambisa forest. Let us quote more extensively from Shekau’s testament: “Let them inform and explain to the Caliph my position and hear his version. Let them do that so that we will see whom the Caliph will say is on the right path. Because I still believe that the Caliph is not fully briefed about my Islamic views. He was not aware, I know. Right from Abubakar Al-Baghdadi to this Abu Ibrahim, they [the Caliphs] are not aware about my dispute with these people. They [ISWAP] are only going about deceiving people.”

28. On another note, this episode seems to confirm that Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula played a part in connecting Al-Qaeda from its stronghold by the Afghanistan-Pakistan to Africa, as well as Al-Qaeda’s dependence on physical couriers for top-level correspondence. The Islamic State seems to have relied much more on electronic communications.

Here, Shekau believes or, more exactly perhaps, pretends to believe that ISWAP deceived the IS Caliph, that the latter was not fully aware of the situation and that he would have judged in Shekau's favour if he were accurately informed. Shekau claims to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Caliph. This apparent oddity invites to a nuanced understanding of the relations of the Islamic State with the Nigerian jihad. To begin, it is important to measure the gap between the statements of the Islamic State and those of ISWAP regarding Shekau. I have mentioned above the virulent attacks by ISWAP against Shekau—a tumour to be cut out, as Habib Yusuf once famously wrote. But in contrast to these violent criticisms, the Islamic State did not even mention Shekau's name when it acknowledged Habib Yusuf as its new *wali* in West Africa in lieu of Shekau in August 2016, and it has never said anything about Shekau since: it has never disowned him publicly, nor rejected his pledge.

I have indicated elsewhere that despite the frustration that the IS may have felt vis-à-vis Shekau for reasons quite similar to Al-Qaeda, it was not the IS that engineered the 2016 split. The move was taken by Nigerian jihadi unhappy with Shekau's record. Aliyu himself had been a forerunner, and Shekau had had him executed because he saw him as a rival with dangerous capacity. But Aliyu had allies, notably in the two sons of Mohamed Yusuf, Habib and Abba, and they mobilised the discontents and left the Sambisa forest²⁹ (Foucher 2020). The IS was informed *ex post facto* of their move. And even while the IS found Shekau a difficult partner, it was not too pleased with their decision to break away. It called for reconciliation and it suggested new institutional arrangements to solve the matter. Al-Baghdadi in person held a three-way call with Shekau and Yusuf to try and sort things out (Bana, interview 2020). The IS put Habib Yusuf to test, asking him to demonstrate his faction's military capacity before acknowledging him. The IS brokered a ceasefire between the two factions and arranged for Shekau to release the relatives of ISWAP members who had been imprisoned (Kyari, interview 2019). Only after having exhausted all options did the IS throw its lot behind the dissenters, announcing Yusuf as its *wali* for West Africa in August 2016.

Probably in part because of the influence of the IS, large-scale combats between the two factions quickly stopped. From late 2016 until its push into Sambisa in May 2021, there is no record that ISWAP ever launched attacks against Shekau. As for Shekau's fighters, dependent as they were on razzias against civilians, they eventually attacked civilians in ISWAP-controlled areas, and ISWAP fighters tried to fight them off on these occasions. But after the initial combats of 2016, neither faction ever launched a frontal assault against the other until May 2021. After the split, Shekau himself, while he reverted to fighting under the banner of JASDJ, which had been the movement's official designation until he pledged allegiance to Caliph al-Baghdadi, took to copying the media style of ISWAP, the logos and even the

29. Other major conspirers included Abu Fatima, the top jihadi leader in Alagarno forest, Abubakar Mainok, the top jihadi leader in the Tumbun area of Lake Chad and Mamman Nur, a popular preacher and long-time adversary of Shekau.

designation. In many of its videos, JASDJ had been presenting itself as the “Islamic State in West Africa” (Al-Lami 2018).

Shekau’s “trolling” and the absence of large-scale confrontation between the two groups for several years may indicate the special appeal of the idea of the Caliphate among supporters of jihad in the Northeast of Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin: contrary to Al Qaeda’s long-term struggle, the Caliphate has been giving a sense of proximate yet historical realisation and a unity of purpose. Maybe Shekau himself echoes that moment of awe and hope when he mentions in his testament that Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi hailed indeed from the prestigious Qurayshi lineage, that he was a blood relation to Prophet Muhammad—a requisite for any pretender to the Caliphate. Something special happened as Al-Baghdadi pronounced the re-establishment of the Caliphate, from which Shekau dared not distance himself. And yet, Shekau’s pledge was politic indeed. Several former jihadi associates are clear that Shekau had delayed pledging as much as possible (Bana, interview 2020; Ibrahim, phone interview 2021; Abba, phone interview 2021). Tellingly perhaps, Shekau felt the need to deny this delay in his final audio. When Shekau eventually pledged, in March 2015, it was because his position had been weakened by the counter-offensive of the Lake Chad states and because his internal critics were increasingly vocal. In a difficult moment, Shekau tried to appease them while courting the assistance of the Islamic State.

As I have shown elsewhere, just like he had done with Al-Qaeda, Shekau welcomed the assistance that came from the IS in the form of money (Foucher 2020). Advice also came, but Shekau implemented only the reforms he pleased, and he did not moderate his *takfiri* attitude in the least. He often simply refused to follow the guidance of the Islamic State—allowing suicide attacks and other massacres against Muslim civilians in state-controlled areas, for instance. This was yet another factor in the 2016 split.

According to interviewees, Shekau had a tense relationship with a group of Arab jihadi with IS connections, led by a Abu Ayyub, who came from Libya to the Sambisa and played a part in connecting Shekau to the IS, provided training and pushed for organisational improvements (Kyari, interview 2019; Bana, interviews 2019 and 2020; Suleiman, interview 2020; Adam, interview 2020; Ali, phone interview 2020; Ibrahim, phone interview 2021). It is probably these visitors that Shekau alludes to in his testament when he mentions “some Arabs” who tried to convince him of the value of Western education. What these global jihadi probably argued was that in the modern curricula, there were elements that were essential to training efficient fighters. But as is well known, for Shekau and many other Nigeria jihadi, modern, Western-style education (“boko,” in Hausa) was loathed as a sign of Western influence and immorality: *boko was haram*.³⁰ It is not clear whether Shekau truly believed that or feigned to in order to frustrate these cumbersome visitors with too much advice and their local allies, his critics within Boko Haram. What we do know from

30. For a brief introduction to the ambiguities of the notion of *boko*, see Thurston (2018, 13-18) or Foucher (2021).

interviews is that Shekau showed increasing displeasure towards the Arab visitors. Reportedly, he even had Abu Ayyub flogged because he had advised against raising the flags of the Caliphate on affiliated villages, as these attracted air raids—out of conviction or for politics, Shekau saw this as a sign of a wavering commitment to jihad (Ali, phone interview 2020). Eventually, Shekau critics organised the hasty exit of the Arab visitors, an episode which further heightened the tensions within the movement and paved the way for the 2016 split. Aliyu himself was key in that exit, and this was one of the reasons why Shekau had him killed (Bana, interview 2019 & 2020; Suleiman, interview 2020; Adam, interview 2020).

Shekau's relation to the Islamic State was thus no less complicated than his with Al-Qaeda. Shekau was essentially able to fend off the demands of global jihad, but the Islamic State played an involuntary part in the split of 2016, acting as the flag around which critics of Shekau could rally. All the same, Shekau had a hard time shaking off the appeal of the Caliph, and never officially spoke against the Caliphate. The IS has been equally hesitant. Contrary to what I had claimed in an earlier piece (Foucher 2020), the IS had not even been at the initiative of the conversation that eventually led to Shekau's pledge: in an audio released as an answer to Shekau's testament, Habib Yusuf indicates that the Arab visitors who made the pledge possible had come to Borno on their own, not as representatives of the IS, even if they eventually facilitated the connection between the IS and Boko Haram.³¹ When the split happened, the IS was hesitant to throw its lot with Habib Yusuf. It eventually did, helping ISWAP emerge as the dominant jihadi force in the Lake Chad Basin.

Conclusion

Shekau's testament, especially when read in conjunction with interviews with former associates and with other recent media productions by jihadi, holds a lot for those who want to interpret the evolution of Boko Haram, from current developments to the longer-term dynamics of its relation to the global jihad. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the evidence seems to support a middle-of-the-road line in the controversy about the significance of global factors in the Nigerian jihad. Global connections have been real enough, and they certainly cannot be reduced to jihadi propaganda stunts or to fear-mongering by states eager to profit from the various rents of counter-terrorism and the global war on terror. These connections have impacted the functioning of Boko Haram, with a small number of jihadi travelling between fronts, sometimes under orders, sometimes independently, circulating expertise and training, often holding important positions within the movement. Uqba, Aliyu, Abu Ayyub, all were important and impactful figures. And yet Shekau outlived Uqba. He had Aliyu executed. He had Abu Ayyub flogged

31. The audio is available at <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2021/06/21/iswap-abu-musab-al-barnawi-audio-to-the-one-who-calls-himself-al-shekawi-june-21-2021/>. For a comment, see @VincentFoucher, June 21, 2021: <https://twitter.com/VincentFoucher/status/1406902693529108485> [archive].

and running for his life. Eventually, however, Shekau died a violent death, by his own hand, leaving his nemesis Habib Yusuf in a stronger position than ever. While Yusuf's connection to the Islamic State was not his only resource in all this, the fact that he has been more adept than Shekau at engaging with the global jihad, more committed, more open to change, less sectarian, has certainly been a key factor in his victory. That Yusuf was wounded, possibly killed, soon after by Bakura, and that ISWAP's takeover of JASDJ is proving difficult testifies to the limits that global jihad continues to face in its attempts to shape local jihad.

Sources

Shekau's testament, 18 May 2021

Audio recording

See: <https://doi.org/10.34847/nkl.cf51nwx5>.



Download part. 1/2



Download part. 2/2

English translation

Translated from the Hausa.

All praises be to God. May peace and blessing be upon the Seal of Prophets [one of the designations of Prophet Muhammad]. By the grace of God, my dear brothers, we are in the month of Shawwal 1442 [13 May to 10 June 2021]. Now by God's permission [God knows best], I want to repeat the message I delivered in Kanuri yesterday morning among the brothers. Now I want to deliver it in Hausa because I want this message to spread all around, so that even the *jinn* [spirit] will participate in propagating it, so that the message can reach as far as we want. This is enough for us to practice our religion.

The aim is to brief you about those who have come here and have connived with some of us to deceive us. Because God has promised that no external forces would harm any Islamic movement that is on the path of godliness unless insiders are involved [is it the translation of "Innallaha la yugairu ma bi qaumin hatta Yugairu ma anfuhim," which you translate as "God will not change how people live unless they themselves change the way they live"? Is this in Arabic?]. God has also warned us that we should not harm one another as fellow Muslims and it is because of this that I decided to pledge allegiance to our *Amir al-Mu'minin* [in Arabic, Commander of the Faithful, one of the titles of the Caliph], so that we will not be a cause for the division of the community of the Muslims. There is nothing that God and his Prophet dislike as much as division in His religion, and that is what we believe and practice.

But consider this: these are people who have pledged allegiance to God, pledging that they will not harm or cause disaffection amongst us, but they have come to us to bring war and they have deceived us, using some of our members. These are people we trusted, people who promised that they could not be used in any way to harm this religion. But they are now the ones being used to harm Islam. Well, no problem. God hears us. For us, we believe that even if you are in the middle of an ocean, you will reach your intended destination if God wishes, as long as you are in the path of truth. The trick they have played on us now, as we can see, has led to serious combat that has caused the death and injury of many of our brothers, in a confrontation that has used our own trusted people. It is not them, the outsiders, who did this damage to us, it is the people among us.

Now, they are going about, claiming “we are one people.” According to them, because we have faced a disaster and because our members have connived with them in this, that is why we have kept silent. But as far as we are concerned, we know that such actions by themselves will not bring a solution to the problem between us. We decided to retreat for tactical reasons [it does seem an accurate translation of “mutaharrifan li Qitaalin aw Mutahai’izan ilah fi’atin”? is “we decided to retreat to change combat tactics and bring in reinforcements” better?]. And then we moved aside and reviewed the events as they unfolded, and this gave them an opportunity to go on spreading false claims, telling people that we are the same as them, that they did not come to fight us, that it is *imam* Shekau who is the *wali* [in Arabic, governor, the title which designates the leader of a branch of the Islamic State] [I don’t understand that: why did ISWAP say Shekau was the wali?]. They also said *wali* Shekau is the problem, that *ghanima* [in Arabic, war booty] is not shared with you, etc. Or, in some instances, they told our people to surrender and join them. They said that in the whole of this forest, no one has done more harm to this religion than Shekau. In some cases, they even say “everybody knows us as *qaid* [commanders] under Shekau, because initially, whoever saw us saw us together with him. We were doing the same thing as him. Because of this, if there is a way, let Shekau be told to declare his loyalty to Abu Ibrahim, who is now the Caliph after al-Baghdadi [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the IS Caliph from 2013 to 2019]. If he does that, then we will all agree for him to become *wali* of the whole African continent.” That is what they are going about saying.

But for me, I will say all these are hearsays. To do justice to them, I will say that I will consider that it is all hearsays. If the message reached them as such [as hearsay], they may decide to reject or accept it [I am not sure I understand this sentence—who is “they,” here?], but even then, what is our contention? I have said it and I leave it for God and also to those who want to practice the true religion of God to hear and judge. If I am on the wrong side or I am in error, I have deceived my *Umma*. But if it was the Caliph who was misled about me, then let him explain his own point of view. I know that the problem between us is not about *kaba`ir* [major sin], *ahkam* [rulings] or *ibadat* [worship], but it is about *aqida* [creed] over *kufur bawah* [open disbelief], about which prevailing reasons from the religion is clear [not sure I understand]. The misunderstanding is not even between us [not sure what is that “us”], but even the Caliph has to demonstrate that he is not committing disbelief about what is justifiable in the sight of God. They should have referred to the books, but in these matters, it is not up to reference to a book, it is too open [I don’t understand].

All they say is “we are all one.” What they should do is come out and bring justifications from the Holy Book to show that I am wrong and that they are right. If, as they have said, they have agreed for me to be the *wali* after I have paid allegiance to the *Amir al-Mu`minin*, then you have no right in Islam to wage war against an *amir*

[leader] even if I am wrong. If you argue about anything in religion, then refer to the Quran and the *hadith* [in Arabic, sayings] of the *Rasul* [in Arabic, the Messenger of God, i.e. Muhammad]. The only option you have is to approach me and ask for my justifications, let me give you the justifications why what I am doing is the right thing. But if it is about matters of *kufir akbar* [major disbelief], then you have no other option than to remain and die with what you believe, which is the beneficial option for you in that regard. If I fail to convince you, then you have the right to say whatever you want to say about me. For me, I am doing what I believe is correct and if I die because of this, I know I stand to gain.

The main issue that divides us... I will tell you what we did in our last sitting, though I don't know whether they are ignorant about it or they are being deceived... if they are ignorant about it, then let them ask and know so that they can repent. But if they were deceived, then let them say it and write to the leader [what word is used, here? What leader does he mean? Himself or the Caliph?] to clarify it for them. Even if it is to deceive, let bring justifications from the Quran and the Hadith. As I know myself, I have never revolted against the *Amir al-Mu'minin* [which word is used, here? Khalifa or amir al Muminin?]. They go about misinforming the *Amir al-Mu'minin* [which word is used, here? Khalifa or amir al Muminin?]. about issues of *kufir* [in Arabic, unbelief] between us and refuse to inform the Caliph [which word is used, here? Khalifa or amir al Muminin?] about the real issues. But for me, I will never tolerate any infidelity to God, and if I see it in any form, I will fight, whether the Caliph is aware of it or not. God Almighty knows better.

Our problem with them is known to everyone. The people of Nigeria... what am I saying? not even the people of Nigeria, but all the people of Africa... if anyone of them who has not been in Islam throughout his life, or if he has no genuine Islamic faith, or if he believes only in part of the Quran while disbelieving in another part, as long as he has not repented for doing that, he is a *kafir* [in Arabic, unbeliever] to me. But to them, these people in Nigeria who call themselves Muslims cannot be termed *kufar* [in Arabic, unbelievers] because they are observing the five daily prayers and believe in the existence of one God. "So how then can they be referred to as *kufar*? They can only be addressed as *murtad* [apostates]." I don't agree with this view at all, because if you say they are *murtad*, you are saying they were true Muslims before they renounced their faith, because God said "Oh you, believers, whoever renounces his faith..." Those whom God called believers were real believers before they renounced their faith. But it is not true in the case of these Nigerians, because they have agreed with one portion of Islam [or the Quran?] and they have disagreed with another portion. Then how different are they from the Jews who say "we agree with a portion but we disagree with another"? God said to the Jews "you are real *kufar*." This is what the so-called Muslims of Nigeria are doing. This is one of the biggest problems between us.

Secondly, they said that they are going to fight only the security forces, i.e. those carrying arms against them, that they are not going to harm the civilian population, and that they are not going to capture and take the civilians as slaves because they [these civilians] say prayers and believe in the existence of one God. But for me, they are all unbelievers [he uses *kufar*?] and should be captured and enslaved, along with their women. This is my position.

I know Hausa alone is not enough to carry my message throughout the world. I will find time to make this address in Arabic. Even if I don't do it, I know it can be interpreted to Arabic. I am only using Hausa [now] because the issue is internal.

These are the main issues that have divided us. They also go about with one notion that every human is born a Muslim, [and] that it is his parents who convert him into a Jew, a Christian or a *majus* [in Arabic, initially the priests and, by extension, the followers of the Zoroastrian religion and, more broadly, a follower of non-Abrahamic religion]. Yes, I agree with them because the Prophet said so. But what will they say about a Jew born a Muslim and who grows up to practice the Jewish religion? About a Christian born a Muslim and who grows up to practice Christianity? A *kirdi* [a derogative term Muslim Hausa-speakers use to designate a practitioner of traditional African religions, a “pagan”] born a Muslim and who grows up to practice traditional religion [what is the word used, here?]? I do not know, except that if you commit *shirk* [in Arabic, idolatry, a grave sin consisting in worshipping someone else than God], you know your end. Maybe... I don't know the Arabs in Saudi Arabia and Iraq (or Iran?), they may be born Muslims and grow up as Muslims. But in Nigeria? No, I don't think. Because Nigerians believe in democracy. They agree to govern based on what God has not revealed. And if you don't believe these people are unbelievers, then you are also one of them. Maybe there are a few hidden that I don't know and because I don't know them, it does not mean that they cannot be found.

These same people were the ones who disparaged me before the Caliph right from the time when we first came to this forest. Let everyone hear this, including the *jinn* himself: I initially paid my loyalty and allegiance to Al-Qaeda. It was Uqba who maintained the link between me and Al-Qaeda. It was the same Uqba whom I used to send to Mali to go and come back. He was even the one who brought back fifty million, men and some guns to us. And it was these fifty million which triggered the problem that led to our divisions and to the likes of Abu Muhammad [probably Abu Muhammad al-Bauchiwī] and Nadah [can you confirm the name?] revolting against me and joining them [who?]. When they insisted that I should hand over the money to them to carry out Islamic duties, I declined, reminding them that I am the leader and as such I am the one who is supposed to be in custody of the money [or is it “and that I am the leader to be obeyed and followed”?], and this became a serious issue between us. God will surely judge between us on the day of judgment. That is why I am not going against my pledge.

The same Uqba went to Mali again, but there was one brother, a very truthful Muslim, who was a *qaid*, who came all the way from Yemen to Mali to deliver a letter saying that there was a serious crisis in Al-Qaeda, that I should forget about Al-Qaeda and practice *tawhid* [in Arabic, unicity (of God), a key tenet of Islam, which can by extension designate religion itself] and that God will guide me on what to do next. It was the same Uqba who brought this letter to me in Sambisa [he mentions Sambisa explicitly?]. He was even intercepted on his way and detained for six months by the Nigerian *kafir* [should it not be *kufar*? Which word is he using?] who tortured him to the extent that he nearly lost his mind. But despite that, he was able to make it and deliver this letter to me.

Secondly, after getting this information, knowing what had happened to Al-Qaeda, I remained neutral until they came up with this information that now, there is a new *Amir al-Mu'minin* who is from the *qaba'il* [in Arabic, tribe] [should it not be the singular, *qabila*?] of the Prophet, that we are supposed to pay allegiance to him. I hesitated to agree because of our initial experience with al-Qaeda, so I needed to have a concrete *dalil* [justification] for doing that. I offered to give a written explanation [of our doctrine] so that the the new leader will read and see whether we are following the Sunna [in Arabic, the (religious) law and custom] or not. Where corrections are needed, he can effect them. We all agreed on this. They collected the letter and took

it to Lake Chad and after sometime they came back here to tell me that they had delivered the letter and that the *Amir al-Mu'minin* [or *khalifa*?] was pleased with me. He even praised me as a good person, a *khalis* [in Arabic, a pure person] and agreed to make me the *wali* of this place. That very night, I declared my loyalty and allegiance to the *Amir al-Mu'minin*. This is in brief what happened between us.

Now, I don't want to talk too much. Let them think [or "Let them not consider"?] that I am interested in power or leadership. Let them try and reach to the Caliph to confirm that what I am doing is not *kufur* and let them inform and explain to the Caliph my position and hear his version even on deception. Let them do that so that we will see whom the Caliph will say is on the right path. He who alleges must prove and he who disagrees must admit (I am not sure I understand "admit" here... and is this a quote in Arabic?) Because your Caliph, even if he is a *zaalim* [a transgressor], you must obey and follow him. I know the Caliph is not aware. If he was aware, he could not accept this as religion, because he has the *aqida* of *wala* and *bara* [*al-wala wal-bara* is a Quranic principle that is central in jihadi theology, which insists on the need for Muslims to be loyal to other Muslims and disavow non-believers]. If they said that I am *wali*, let them change me so that I can survive with my bicycle and my family and die and obtain *al-Jannah* [Paradise]. Because I still believe that the Caliph is not fully briefed about my Islamic views. He is not aware, I know. Right from Abubakar al-Baghdadi to this Abu Ibrahim, they [the Caliphs] are not aware of my dispute with these people.

That is what happened when some Arabs came here to me, trying to convince me to accept Western education. But when I explained to them the meaning of the Nigerian national anthem and the national pledge, they went out crying. It happened here in this *markaz* [in Arabic, centre]. They confessed to me that they did not know it was like that. This *markaz*, this place will testify about what happened on the last day [meaning "the Day of Judgment"?]. Let them try this and see if I can comply or not. Let them not go around and deceive people that our *aqida* is the same as theirs and that we are together. If this is the type of religion that they preach, it is better for me to die and leave this world with the *Shahada* [in Arabic, a testimony, and, in this instance, the basic statement of the Islamic faith] and enter paradise because the poorest person in paradise has seven times the size of this world. Let them not deceive me and the people. Let them not deceive me and the people because each one of us has the certainty that he must die. We all know the issues are *kufur akbar*. If a person has committed minor sins, he is our brother even though the smallest *kufur* is greater than homosexuality in the eye of God. But still, he is a believer. But we know that what is being practiced here [or there?] is *kufur akbar*. Even he himself, Habib—I will mention his name—came here at that time and brought some books about the issue of Western education [what word does Shekau use? Boko?], trying to convince me to agree to it, but I refused. Well, God will judge between us.

I have delivered this message in Hausa for those Hausa speakers here to hear and know what has been going on. I will soon deliver this message in Arabic for the whole world to hear. Even if I have not done the Arabic version, I have the belief that this will be spread even by the *Jinns* [here, he uses the plural for *jinn*?].

That is the end. Let them do anything and survive for the next 100 years. If they feel I am eager to remain the *wali*, let them confirm to me that what I'm doing is *shirk akbar* [a major *shirk*] with all the justifications that the Quran and the Sunnah offer. They will also admit to you that, in the western education system, there are things that are *Kufur* and others that are not. But the issue there is *ikhtilakh* [in Arabic, mingling]. Some will use this doctrine that 'Al Aslu Fil Ashyaai Al Islaha meaning

‘the origin of any action is lawful...while others will prefer ‘Al Aslu Fil Ashyaai Attaharim meaning ‘the origin of any action is forbidden... I said yes, but now that they have mixed up and you must do some *haram* [in Arabic, forbidden by religion] things before doing what is *halal* [in Arabic, authorised]. For example, am I not taking drugs [he means medicine?]? Am I not using what they [who is they? The Westerners?] have constructed? Am I doing it because they are *halal*? But if you enter their [Western] school, you have to do *kufur akbar*. This is undisputable, you do *kufur akbar*.

That was why one Ibn Kathir who paraded as one time *qaid* saying “we are together with Imam Shekau, as you can see. We are not touching any civilians. We don’t tamper with your properties. So, if you surrender to us, it is okay. You can even inform him, Mallam [in Hausa, a religious scholar, derived from the Arabic *alim*] that if he submits to us, he will be the wali of the whole Africa. Then how do you appoint *wali* and revolt against him? Can you fight your *wali* if you are a believer?

There was this question of the slave women that I caught as non-believers [kufar?!] They went around, accusing me of illegally taking women as slaves. If they accept me as their *amir*, then they are in trouble. What transferred between sayyidina Ali (RA) and Asim; Abu khalid. Malik Ibn Numaira abused the Prophet (SAW) during the reign of sayyidina Abubakar (RA). He was killed by Khalid Ibn Walid and married his widowed wife. This threw Shubha (doubt in matters of rulings) to Abu Qatada who asked Sayyidina Abubakar (RA) about what Khalid did. And he replied by saying “you are under an *amir* and performing your rights [duties?] and now you come to me because of a problem? Go back and remain with your *amir*. If one battle took place without you, then you are a sinner! All this is written in the Books. So, if you accept that I’m your *amir*, then you are in trouble!

That was why when I was deceived (*gadar*) [this is really the word he uses? He was deceived into pledging allegiance?] to declare allegiance to Khalifa, I did it immediately and if you have *tawhid*, you have to remain faithful to your allegiance. And still, they went around and said I did this, and that, and that and this. If what I am doing is *kabair* (major sins), *Ahkam* (Rulings) or *Ibaadaat* (Worships), then I am a sinner but still remain as an *amir*. However, what you now accuse me of is *kufur bawaahan* [in Arabic, open disbelief] and even that, if it was with concrete reason...’Ma Indana Fihii Minallahi Burhan’ meaning ...that which has direct ruling from Allah... then I would accept it and practice it even if I’m alone on this, because I have discovered the true path. And if later I realize that you have changed what you said, then you have to prove that what I am saying is wrong. Let them do that and see if I’m eager to remain as *wali* or if I want to die with my true religion! God is our witness.

May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon the messenger of Allah. All praises are due to Allah.

These are the explanation being circulated to deceive ignorant people. So, my dear brothers, please spread this message to all and sundry, including women, and if you have access, even to them [ISWAP members] for justice of speech so that they can hear my own version of the story. If it is an explanation that they need, then I have given it. But if they have ulterior motives, then let them do whatever they can. They cannot do anything to me, no matter how long it takes. I will never follow anybody in the path of infidelity. I am not doing this because of power. Even if they turn the sky upside down, I will not be deceived... There is God! Even the *Dajjal* [in Arabic, the Impostor who will come at the End of Times] will come and he will order grass to grow but yet believers will oppose him. So, I cannot believe based on deception, just bring forth justifications.

Delivered by I, Abu Muhammad Abubakar bin Muhammad al-Shekawi, leader of Jama'atul Ahlal sunna ledawati wal Jihad

On this day, Tuesday, shawwal 1442

List of interviews³²

- Abba, former member of Boko Haram. Phone interview, September 16, 2021.
- Abubakar, former member of Boko Haram. Interview, Maiduguri, October 23, 2018.
- Adam, former member of Boko Haram. Interview, Maiduguri, March 2, 2020.
- Ali, former member of Boko Haram. Phone interviews, November 24, 2020, December 4, 2020 & September 8, 2021.
- Aliyu, former member of Boko Haram. Maiduguri, March 1st 2020.
- Baba, former member of Boko Haram. Phone interview, September 16, 2021.
- Bana, former member of Boko Haram. Interviews, Maiduguri, November 29, 2019, December 2, 2019 & February 29, 2020; phone interviews, January 29, 2020 & September 20, 2020.
- Cissé, Malian journalist. Phone interview, May 29, 2021.
- Hassan, former member of Boko Haram. Phone interview, October 18, 2021.
- Ibrahim, former member of Boko Haram. Phone interview, January 26, 2021.
- Khadija, relative of Mohamed Yusuf. Interview, Maiduguri, March 2, 2020; phone interview, January 9, 2021.
- Kyari, former member of Boko Haram. Interview, Maiduguri, December 2, 2019.
- Kolo, former member of Boko Haram. Interviews, Maiduguri, December 2, 2019 & February 29, 2020.
- Musa, former member of Boko Haram. Phone interview, August 31, 2021.
- Suleiman, former member of Boko Haram. Interview, Maiduguri, March 5 & 6, 2020.
- Usman, former member of the Boko Haram. Phone interview, October 4, 2021.

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32. I have attributed all interviewees mentioned here pseudonyms.

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