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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 Muhammad Yusuf in the early 2000s, Yusuf’s brutally suppressed uprising and execution in 2009, the re-emergence of the movement as insurgency under the designation *Jamā’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, after which JASDJ became the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), the 2016 split which saw dissenters under Yusuf’s son Habib 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 puzzling 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 gnosis increasingly detached from reality.

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. On the history of that problematic designation, see among others Foucher (2021). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers and to Alessio Iocchi for their feedback on this paper and to Ousman Ibrah Waziri and another translator who translated the document here commented, to two Maiduguri based analysts who helped with certain aspects of the translation and to Sam Heller for advice on the transliteration of the Arabic words.

The strongest 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 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 with 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 avowed current or former members (the notable exceptions include 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, even if it is also consumed within the organisation itself. 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

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 institutions.

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 2009, recorded on 18 May 2021, 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, as a companion website (unmaskingbokoharam.com) to his book about the movement (Zenn 2020a). I speak no Hausa myself and I first obtained an English language translation of the piece from a Maiduguri-based collaborator with whom I have been working a long time, researching the Boko Haram conflict. He is a native Hausa-speaker but not a professional translator. I also obtained a French language translation from Ousman Ibrah Waziri, a researcher at the Laboratoire Langue et culture arabes at the Université Abdou Moumouni in Niamey, a native Hausa-speaker with experience in translating Arabic texts. In consultation with both translators and with two Hausa-speaking security analysts based in Borno with direct expertise in the conflict, I finalised the English-language translation below. I have chosen to keep its oral style, complete with repetitions and unfinished sentences, while trying to preserve a degree of fluidity, adding likely missing words and explanations between brackets. I have also chosen to keep words in Arabic used by Shekau when they refer to important religious notions, with the necessary explanations between brackets.

For scholars researching Boko Haram, documents produced primarily for 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

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 wounded or 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.

grown more mellow, producing audios and videos in which he limited himself to restating his creed and principles in general terms, but 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 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

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

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).

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 ethnoreligious tensions, the ambiguities of federalism as a solution to these, the country’s 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, 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. These details, 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 in which “[m]any brothers were killed,” and he insists that ISWAP was able to rally some of Shekau’s “own people.”

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) “for the whole of Africa.”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 for their failing and demonstrated their loyalty to the Caliph could be accepted back into the community and even regain their leadership positions.¹¹ 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 Muhammad Yusuf, one of them in all likelihood Habib Yusuf, who led the 2016 split and took over from Shekau as ISWAP’s *wali* in the region. Habib Yusuf eventually lost his command in 2019, but in May 2021, he returned as the *ad interim* leader of ISWAP and led 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.

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*).

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]. 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).

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

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 don't know if he knows or not. That is what I think of the Caliph. Even the first Caliph, Abubakr al-Baghdadi... I swear, I know he does not know." 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, and Shekau knew it, as is clear from his speech in which Shekau mentions his readiness and indeed, desire, to leave our world. 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, 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 bet the Army on 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 what 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 Doron, 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 Doron's group, Bakura Sahalaba, denounced ISWAP

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].

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 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). Rather than submit to ISWAP, others chose to surrender to the Nigerian authorities, encouraged by their promise of demobilisation and reintegration (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

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. Yusuf's sudden silence from July 2021 after the release of several lengthy audios since May may be another clue. 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).

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/>.

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 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, when Al-Qaeda broke paths with him and threw its lot with a small group of more dependable internationalised Nigerian jihadi who were 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

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).

19. Pérouse de Montclos (2015, 111) had dismissed the notion of such an allegiance. 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 (Kolo, interview 2019; Bana, phone interview 2020; Ibrahim, phone interview 2021; Cissé, phone interview 2021). On the Abbottabad document, see Zenn (2020a, 153).

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), 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 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 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, 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 thanks to Shekau that the money was indeed received, as well as some men and weapons. We also know it caused a bit of stir, though it is not completely clear why. Shekau says: “They demanded the money for their work. I said that it is for the leader to [decide]...” 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, implicitly contrasting his activities – insurgency – and their “work.” Other sources 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 would often send 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 mentioned above (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

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.

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 Muhammad Yusuf's moderation at the time, who left to create a militant community by the Niger border and who were brutally suppressed by the Nigerian authorities in 2003–2004 (on the Nigerian Taleban, see Bukarti 2020). According to Zenn (2020c, 125), Uqba may have been part of the Nigerian Taleban himself and he may have been involved in the 2007 killing of Sheikh Jaafar Adam, a leading Salafi scholar who had been 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 Shabaab of Somalia by Muhammad 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).

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.

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 Somali (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.

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 Muhammad 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 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 looking for a new war to fight (Suleiman, interview 2020). He too played a key part in developing the military apparatus of JASDJ.²⁵ More fundamentally still, 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

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.

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 Muhammad Yusuf's savvy preaching and networking had created a real social base to draw upon, the jihadi were much less well-rooted. 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.

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 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 Al-Qaeda was "in trouble" (could it be a fallout of the death of Ben Laden in May 2011?), insisting that Shekau should do what he thinks right, a polite but clear dismissal: Al-Qaeda had more urgent matters to address. This distancing did not stop the ascent of his 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 capacity of African actors for extraversion, their ability to make dependency on outside resources work for their local preoccupations. Shekau had no qualms about deploying one such strategy of extraversion in his relationship with Al-Qaeda.

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

In his relationship with the Islamic State, Shekau was even more ambivalent, trying to navigate between the defence of his autonomy and the appeal of the IS Caliphate. Ultimately, he had 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.

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.

Let us quote more extensively from Shekau's testament: "And if my position is fairer, let the Caliph speak. I don't know if he knows or not. That is what I think of the Caliph. Even the first Caliph, Abubakr al-Baghdadi... I swear, I know he does not know. If he knew what I saw, he would not validate that thing and say religion is going to be better."

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 (IS) with the Nigerian jihad. To begin, it is important to measure the gap between the statements of the IS 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 IS 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 Muhammad Yusuf, Habib and Abba, and they were part of a group of discontents who eventually 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 the split. 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

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.

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 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. 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 to the IS Caliph in 2015 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). Shekau admits in his testament that he did raise questions, mentioning his prior allegiance to Al-Qaeda and asking for proofs of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's lineage – two former jihadi associates claim he even demanded to meet al-Baghdadi in person (Kolo, interview 2019; Bana, phone interview 2020). In what seems like a telling attempt to justify himself on a controversial count, Shekau insists in his testament that after he had obtained clarifications, he asked to pledge immediately. But when Shekau he did so, 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 – on this, Shekau is strangely candid in his testament, insisting he "decided to pledge allegiance" because "God has also warned us that we [Muslims] should not harm one another." In a difficult moment, Shekau tried to appease his critics while courting the assistance of the IS.

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 IS—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 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 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 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’s 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 IS was thus no less complicated than his with Al-Qaeda. He was essentially able to fend off the demands of global jihad, but the IS played an involuntary part in the split of 2016, acting as the flag around which his critics 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, Abu Ayyub’s team, 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

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

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].

fear-mongering by states eager to profit from the various rents of counter-terrorism and the global war on terror. These connections to global jihad 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 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 Hausa and Arabic.*³²

All praises be to God. May peace and blessing be upon the Seal of the Prophets [one of the designations of Prophet Muhammad]. May peace, mercy and blessing be upon you. By the grace of God, my dear brothers, we are in the month of Shawwal 1442 of the calendar of the Hijra of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina [13 May to 10 June 2021]. 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. I want this message to spread all around, even by a *jinn* [spirit], as far as we want. This is enough, God willing, as religion.

The first thing is about those who have come here and have connived with some of us to deceive us. God did say that it is impossible for a group of people to assemble

32. I have chosen to leave a number of Arabic words that refer to specific concepts of Islam, giving a translation and explanation in square brackets. I have sometimes also used brackets to clarify certain meanings.

under a leader and declare that they are the path of God, and then some harm happens from the outside. According to God and his messenger, God does not change the condition of people unless they have changed it themselves [meaning that an Islamic community can only be hurt if traitors are involved]. God has also warned us that we [Muslims] should not harm one another. This is why I decided to pledge allegiance [to the Islamic State Caliph]. Even if one is wronged in the religion, it is not a reason to divide the religion. The thing that God and his Prophet dislike most is division. This is the first thing, by the will of God.

And so, they have imposed a fight upon us and they have betrayed us with [the help of] our own people. These are people whom we trusted, who pretended to work with us and they pledged to God that they would not betray the religion. Well, no problem. God hears us now. Through these explanations I record, God will make this message heard wherever he wants it to be heard, even underwater. As long as you are sincere... The trick they have played, those who have just come... We have seen the war they have waged. Many brothers were killed. Others were wounded in this war conducted by some of our own people. It is not them [ISWAP] who did this damage to us, it is the people among us. Now, they are talking. They are pleased about the disaster that we have faced because of our own. Without this method [allying with some of Shekau's men], there would have been no way.

We withdrew for tactical reasons, and they think they have defeated us. They talk to people to deceive them and say that we are one, that we have always been one, that they have not come to fight us. "Our target, it is what *imam* [religious guide, Shekau's title as leader of JASDJ] Shekau has done" or "it is what *wali* [governor, the title which designates the leader of a branch of the Islamic State] Shekau has done." This is the truth of their words. "Do you see? *Ghanima* [war booty] is not shared with you [fighters] sometimes. And what has been done to you sometimes... [Shekau alludes to longstanding accusations that he has mistreated a number of his followers]." These are the explanations they have given. Sometimes, they simply say "Imam, you, you must surrender. Let us apply religion simply. We have brought [true] religion to this forest." This means that the one who has betrayed religion is Shekau. In some explanations... Then, in some [other] speeches, they say "everybody has seen us, everybody knows us. We were *qaid* [commanders] under Shekau. We are together. We were doing everything together. There is no problem. Right now, if there is a way to tell Shekau to declare his loyalty to Abu Ibrahim... He is the one who has succeeded to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as Caliph." They even agree for me to be the *wali* for the whole of Africa [provided he pledges allegiance to the IS Caliph]. That is what they are going about saying.

I am reporting this in accordance with their own statements. This is being fair in words. So, you see? When truth will reach someone, he will deny saying that. And so, if that person did not say that, what is the origin of our misunderstanding? About this too, I will leave a recording, so God can hear, and so all those who want to live according to the religion can hear. If I am the guilty one, I have deceived my *Umma*. But if it was the Caliph who has not heard [has not been well-informed about the situation], 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] and so it is a matter of *kufr bawah* [open disbelief]. What is *kufr bawah*, according to religion... it's not something about me and them. If I hear that the Caliph has committed *kufr bawah*, God says: "we have against him a justification that comes from God" [meaning that it is legitimate to rebel against a Caliph who has committed *kufr bawah*]. We saw in the book... well, it's not even

worth mentioning the book. If the person is honest, he has surely heard about that proof.

And then they came and said “we are all one.” You saw this? So, if we are one, and I have made an error... One does not oppose an erring leader. You have to refer at least to [the following principle]: “If you are fighting between yourselves over anything, refer to God and his Messenger.” This is what you must use. It will be better. But if it is a matter of *kufir* or, worse, of *kufir akbar* [major disbelief], then there is no option: this problem, only God can solve it. Then the solution is, if you have a justification and you die over it, God will accept you. Stay how you are. If you die, I swear that you will have gained. Such is our religion.

Then, what created a conflict between us and them... they think that any man... meaning... the way they are... I am going to say what came to pass between us. If they did not say this or if they don't really know, they must repent. If they know, the case is closed. If they don't know or were deceived because of their lack of knowledge, they should listen to and translate [this audio]. I swear that if one brings a proof, even as a joke [Shekau is trying to emphasise his readiness to accept a discussion in any circumstance], from God and his Messenger... I have never rebelled against the Caliph. This is what I have said. Those with whom we were living here [meaning, the dissenters before they left to create the faction which eventually took over the ISWAP name], they created this argument about *kufir* between the Caliph and I. Then they refused to inform the Caliph about the real problem. If I hear of *kufir* anywhere, I will not let it stand waiting for the Caliph to hear about it. If I hear, anywhere it [*kufir*] is, I will not let it stand until the Caliph hears about it. God is witness. If I hear, anywhere it [*kufir*] is, I will not let it be until the Caliph hears about it. Then, what God asks of me in this instant is to abide by God's recommendations. This is it.

All our problems are known. What I have said... The people of Nigeria... Not even the people of Nigeria, but all of the people of Africa... Someone who has not known Islam, even if he follows some [Islamic] rituals... We accept some [as Muslims] and we refuse others. If a person was not born with a pure faith, and then we capture him as a *kafir* and he does not repent... That person is a *kafir* by origin. This is what I said. Then, they said that those people of Nigeria who pray and do other things, if we capture them, we cannot say they are *kufar*. They are *murtadin*. If you say they are *murtadin*, [it means] you have evidence that they had a pure faith before. God has acknowledged – I ask the protection of God against Satan – the faith of these *murtadin* in the beginning: “O believers! Whoever among you apostasises...” Any person that God calls “O believers,” their faith is great. All those persons who commit *kufir*, some of their works are *kufir* but others are Islamic. The Jews said the same things: “we agree with certain parts [of Islam], we can support them. Other parts, we cannot.” God said “You are the real *kafir*.” “You are the real *kafir*.” This is it, first. The first question... but this... we have begun... God know that the day of Judgment will come.

Then, the second question: those who pray and hand around [under the authority of the Nigerian state]. They [ISWAP], they fight only the *taghut* [idol; a central item of Salafi-Jihadi theology, and, by extension, those who follow other laws than God's, and in this instance, officials of the Nigerian state]. They fight only those who bear arms. The civilian who are subjects [of the Nigerian state], they only get preaching [from ISWAP], as they are showing now. They think that cannot even enslave them. This is my disagreement with them. Me, I say that anybody who is proven to be a *kafir*, he should be captured because of religion, he should be a slave. And what of women? They are slaves. This is my second problem. I know that if this message goes

through, Hausa is not an obstacle. There are, throughout the world, people who can translate in Arabic. Only today... even today, it is because the problem is internal. This is why. I will record another message for the outside, in the Arabic language. It is easy. Such is the second problem. Those are the things that have divided us.

Among what they say in a low voice, they have quoted “every child is born with *fitra* [an innate disposition to obey God].” They are cheating people with this too. “Every child is born with *fitra*.” Yes, I swear, I agree. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing upon him) did say that. It is [the child’s] parents who make him a Jew, a Christian or a *Majus* [a follower of the Mazdean or Zoroastrian religion and, more recently, a Shiite]. So, everyone who has turned into a Christian is a Christian. Everyone who has turned into a Jew is a Jew. Everyone who has turned into a *Majus* is a *Majus*. Anywhere he is. If you do the Jewish rites, you are a Jew. If you do... what, again?... the Christian rites, you are a Christian. If you do the rites of the *Majus* faith, you are a *Majus*.

And then, if you practice *shirk* [idolatry, a grave sin consisting in associating someone to God in worship], you know that God does not agree. Any person who associates God [with some other entity]... So what? You wanted God, and then you mentioned someone else... Why is a company defined as an association? It is because it has several shares. God said that he does not associate with anyone. It is Him alone that one must adore. Such is the definition of *shirk*. There are two kinds of *shirk*. One is called *shirk akbar* [major *shirk*]. When one adores someone else than God. It suffices that I say this, anyone who does that is a *kafir*. He will never get out of Hell. And you are just going to call him a *kafir*. If he was a believer [before], he is a *murtad* [now]. If he has always been like that, or if he was born on that path and followed his parents, he is simply a *kafir* because he has never received Islam. I don’t know about the Arabs, those born in Iran, in Saudi Arabia and so on. There, one can find people who have found their parents on the path of Islam. But I know that here, it is difficult to find a 60-year old person [who was born into proper Islam]... In Nigeria, unbelief entered more than fifty years ago. It is difficult to find among us a fifty-year old person [who was born into proper Islam]... I don’t deny that some may have been practicing [true] religion with their father, in hiding. They can fulfil the criteria. It is not because I don’t know them that they are not Muslims. They are Muslim, although the majority of Nigerians are *kufar*. Why? There, they have democracy. They [ISWAP] and us, we all agree that democracy is *kufur*. They [Nigerian citizens] have democracy. And again, they are subject to laws that have not been revealed by Allah. They do the *hadj*, they fast, they give *zakat* [Shekau mentions three of the five obligations in Islam, the pilgrimage to Mecca, fasting and alms-giving]. And this... not from the scholars... from the beginning until now, this has been called *kufur akbar*. So, now, you refuse all things which are reported as authentic... are you not a... [*kafir*]? You are a... These are the questions that we insist on. These are the questions we have with us. This is what they have hidden, and they have interposed themselves between the Caliph and I.

Listen! In fact, ever since we entered this forest and we settled down... Listen to my words... May God make the *jinn* and the whole world listen hear me. I initially paid allegiance to Al-Qaeda. The one who was the intermediary between Al-Qaeda and me was Uqba. Everybody knows him. I sent him to Mali, he would come and go. He brought us fifty million [nairas], men and some guns. It was these fifty million which created the problems that led to the division with the late Abu Muhammad [very probably Abu Muhammad al-Baushiwi]. They demanded the money for their work. I said that it is for the leader to [decide]... On that too, God will decide on the

Day of Judgment... On this too, if they sit with you, they can talk a whole day. That is why I insist on the issues about which God will judge on the Day of Judgment. God will surely judge between us on the Day of Judgment. That is my goal. So, I initially pledged allegiance. That time, Uqba went back to Mali by himself. There is a brother, God is great, he is a *qaid* and he has the faith. From Yemen to Mali, they sent me a letter to tell that Al-Qaeda is in trouble. "Stay true to your faith, dear Abubakar, until God shows you the way." It was Uqba who brought the letter. It was on his way that he was arrested and jailed in the prisons of the Nigerian *kufar* for six months. He almost lost his mind because of the torture. Despite that, he was able to deliver the letter. Later, Uqba died. Such is the history of my pledge to Al-Qaeda. That is one.

Secondly, after getting this information, knowing what had happened to Al-Qaeda and receiving those informations, we remained at peace [with al-Qaeda?] and God opened the doors of victory to us. Then, they [the Islamic State] introduced this matter. They told us "we are well organised and there is a Caliph. He is known to all." Meaning that he is from the tribe of the Prophet [a requirement to claim the title of Caliph], peace and blessing upon him. I said, I swear, "Here is what I did with al-Qaeda before [i.e. I have already pledged to al-Qaeda]. But now, do not say that he is from the tribe of the Caliph [probably a slip of the tongue: Shekau must have meant Prophet]. It is a thing about which we have no proof. If we follow him, he can replace us. If this is what you wish [that Shekau pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi], let me write letter explaining our doctrine and you send it so the Caliph reads it and understands that we truly are on the right path. If there are errors, he can correct us. Because God and his Messenger recommend that I follow someone based on evidence." They said it was the best thing to do. We wrote the letter. They took it and left it in Chad. They praised me to the Caliph, [saying] I am a good and loyal person. "He does all he does in the right path." They came to tell me that I was praised. He accepted to designate me as his *wali*. So, I said "if I sleep even one night on it, I betray my brothers." So, in the very same night, I pledged allegiance to the Caliph. I admit that this happened between me and them. Then, they introduced this controversial topic. Now, without talking too much, this you can hear thanks to God.

[Now,] the second thing. They should stop thinking I yearn for leadership. I urge them, even if they are not sincere, they should try... Even if they are not sincere, I accept... Even if they are not sincere, so that I hear the voice of the Caliph. What I do is not *kufir*. If they have justifications, they should produce them. Me, I have justifications. If you claim something, you must have justifications and you must bring them forward, and you must be true [to these references]. I beg you, even if they are not sincere. Because I have justifications. If you have been fooled and have pledged allegiance to a Caliph, as unfair as he may be, as long as he is not a *kafir*, you must follow him imperatively. So, even if they are not sincere, that I be allowed [to contact the Caliph]... And see... If they think I yearn for leadership... Whether I will change or not, God will see. I beg you, make an effort, even without sincerity. This is one.

And if my position is fairer, let the Caliph speak. I don't know if he knows or not. That is what I think of the Caliph. Even the first Caliph, Abubakr al-Baghdadi... I swear, I know he does not know. If he knew what I saw, he would not validate that thing and say religion is going to be better. It is impossible for someone who has the *aqida* of *al-wala wal-bara* [a Quranic principle central in jihadi theology, which insists on the need for Muslims to be loyal to other Muslims and disavow non-believers]. It is impossible. Impossible in this religion. If he says he does not know, so there is what was done to me.

So, as they say, if I am recognised as *wali*, God is my witness, I want to be removed. I do not want [the position] any more. Let me stay with my bicycle and my family so I can obtain *al-Jannah* [Paradise]. If we have the same belief, I beg you, this should be done. Now, our problem is about *aqida*. Stop misleading people saying “We are one. We are brothers. We don’t harm anyone.” That is not the problem. Capturing me is easy too. I swear, that kind of life... I wish God would have me depart from this world. That I go to *al-Jannah* as a martyr. These are our objectives. The poorest in *al-Jannah* has a property seventy times larger than this whole world. Stop pitting people against me. Stop pitting people against me. We are all convinced that we are going to die. This comes first.

Everybody must hear. We know that there is nothing to say about *kufur akbar*. Whether you are renowned or not, all that is about *kufur akbar*. If someone commits *kufur ashgar*, he is a brother, he is a Muslim. And for all that, *kufur ashgar* is worse than homosexuality for God. And despite all this, we accept that [this person] is a Muslim brother. As far as we are concerned, we have seen that this is a matter of *kufur akbar* now. They even brought people. They were Arabs. We talked with them in our *markaz* [in Arabic, centre]. Everybody knows. They entered, and we had a disagreement over school. I translated the [Nigerian] national pledge and the national anthem to them... He himself said to me he had never heard it and did not know. One day, that *markaz* [itself] will tell what happened. It will testify in front of God.

All those explanations are given here for those who understand Hausa. If God gives me the opportunity, I will do another one in Arabic for the whole world to hear. And even if I am not able to make it in Arabic, and no matter how blocked the pathways are, this will be transmitted, even by a *jinn*. I have faith in my Maker, for whom I have assembled you, to talk to you today. It is over. They can do anything they want. They can stay alive for a hundred years... There is nothing they can do to me. I am not going to submit to anyone and engage in the path of *kufur akbar*. This is my only concern. If they think I want power or the position of *wali*... Let them say that what I am doing is not *shirk akbar*, based on the justifications contained in the Quran and the Sunna. This is the crux of the problem between them and me.

Even them, they recognise that there is unbelief in certain things in [“modern,” Western-style] school... But this current system [the Western-style school] that people are following throughout the world... And they say nothing [against it]... This is impossible because there are divergent points of view. For some, the rule is that the essence of everything is liceity [something is licit if it is not explicitly prohibited by religion]. For others, the rule is that the essence of everything is in prohibition [everything is prohibited unless it is explicitly authorised by religion]. So, as God has said that all that you see is licit, except that whose illicity you have noticed. So, it is in everything that you can find the illicit ones. I say yes. But now, [in Western-style school], they put them [the licit and the illicit] together so much that they cannot be dissociated. This is what exists [now]. Because today, with this, you cannot do [one cannot study in school without doing illicit things]. In the present time, am I not using Maggi cubes [an example of a product of Western technology]? In the present time, am I not drinking what they have made? It is because it has appeared licit to me, that is why I am doing it. When you study at school, you have to do *kufur akbar*. Nobody can deny that. You have to do *kufur akbar*. It’s over. This is...

God willing, as they have come to say: “let us [talk], in the beginning, we were the *qaid* of Shekau.” There is even one who is named ibn Kathir. He pretends that I designated him *qaid* in Timbuktu [a jihadi camp in Borno, designated after the eponymous Malian city]. It is this man who is going around and explaining to people:

“even I, in the beginning, I was a *qaid* designated by Shekau. We have come to fix things. We will not hurt anyone. You have noticed that we do not touch your property. If you have surrendered, tell the *mallam* [in Hausa, a person learned matters of religion; in this instance, Shekau] that he is the *wali* of the whole of Africa.” How can you acknowledge a *wali* and fight him after that? Does one fight a *wali* if one submits to God? No *wali* should be opposed.

We have only one problem. A slave about whom I talked [Shekau probably meant “the slaves”]. Now, I have female slaves that I have captured. What are they, these ones? They were captured because they are *kufar*. This is one. Secondly, what is surprising is that they are deceiving people and saying that slaves were kept for nothing. We do things [like taking slaves]. If they recognise me as an *amir*, they are done. What happened with our master Ali? With this sinner and with Abu Khalid? That’s it? They are three. This servant of God insulted the Prophet. He reneged on his faith. The other *amir*, in the time of Abu Bakr, killed that servant of God. What was his name? Malik ibn Numaira. It was Abu Khalid who killed him. It was Khalid ibn Walid who killed him. Then he married his wife. I am talking about a disagreement between someone and his *amir*. He married his wife. I swear that this situation put Abu Qutada in a difficult situation. Then, he came to see our master Abu Bakr. He said “There, this man says this [other] one has apostasied. Then he killed him and married his wife. How [is that possible]?” Our master Abu Bakr said “you are under the orders of your *amir*, you work together, and then a problem pushed you to come see me. You are disobedient. Go back. If a battle takes place without you, you will have disobeyed God.” He went back quickly. All the battles in the great Syria... With whom did he work? He stayed and fought under the orders of Khalid. This is in the book.

If you, you recognise that I am your *amir*, it is over. If I have committed an injustice, you can only report to my Caliph. You should not fight me, or betray me, or... you see? From the start, they deceived me and led me to pledge allegiance to the Caliph. I have said “even if you have been deceived, if you pledge allegiance to someone who has the faith of *tawhid* [unicity (of God), a key tenet of Islam, which can by extension designate Islam itself], do not worry. You have to submit. This is the path of God.” That is why I came out to explain to people: “I submit.” And I have stayed [loyal]. Until today. And then, you say that I do this and that. You have not relied on any justification for this. If only what you reproach me with was about *kabair* [major sins], *ahkam* [rulings] or *ibaadaat* [worship], then I am a sinner since it is *kufu bawaahan* [open disbelief]. Or you deny that you ever said that. But this is part of your creed too. It is over. If you are right, I will change my position, even if it is me alone [and others refuse to follow me]. It is over. The day when I see a justification coming from God, that is all. And so, I found a justification to follow. Even me alone, if you say that this thing [Western-style school] is not *kufu*... [I will know that] you have changed. From now until the last day, I will follow my religion. If someone thinks he can do anything about this, he should change this. Or someone should translate [what I have said] to see if I care for the position of *wali* or if I want to practice my religion and die. God will interpret me [Shekau probably meant God will judge me]. God is a witness even when there is no one. May the peace and blessing of God be upon the Messenger of God. Praise be to God, master of the Universe.

These are the explanations they circulate to deceive ignorant people. So, dear brothers, if you have the opportunity, give this [recording] even to women so they listen to it. Even they, if there is a way, they should hear. I accept. That this recording be sent to them. If one wants to defeat me with words, here they are. If I have

committed an injustice, let them be heard. If it is not that, they should do whatever they can. They should upturn the earth and the sky. They cannot fool me. God is here, they cannot do anything. It is difficult for this [ISWAP defeating Shekau] to happen. It is difficult for this to happen. It is Him who can order grass to grow, and then it grows. And yet believers do not believe in that. I cannot be deceived. Simply bring on the justifications. I cannot accept to be deceived. May peace and blessing be upon the Envoy of God. Blessing to God, Master of the Universe. I am Abu Muhammad Abubakar bin Muhammad Shekawi, the *imam* of *Jamā'at Ahl al-Sunna li-Da'wa wal-Jihād*. I have prepared this speech in the month of Shawwal, year 1442 of the Hijra. Today is, God willing... today is Monday, is it not? We are Tuesday today.

List of interviews³³

- 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, 1 March 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 Muhammad 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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33. I have attributed all interviewees mentioned here pseudonyms.

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