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Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin: The Bakura Faction and its Resistance to the Rationalisation of Jihad

Maman Inoua Elhadji Mahamadou Amadou and Vincent Foucher

The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), the Islamic State franchise centred in north-eastern Nigeria, is now one of the most active jihadist movements in the world. ISWAP's success is partly linked to the influence and support of the Islamic State (IS), which has encouraged the movement to adopt a more streamlined, bureaucratic governance that limits the amount of violence committed against Muslim civilians. This streamlining, although it has been ISWAP's strength, is not self-evident: It has caused great tension within the Nigerian jihadist movement. Established in the northern part of Lake Chad, Ibrahim Bakura Doro's group resists this rationalisation and adheres to the historical functioning of jihadism in north-eastern Nigeria, at the crossroads between sectarianism, predation and clientelism. This case study explores the variety of jihadist governance models and their determinants.

The Islamic State's (IS) claim to statehood in the Levant has generated a rich literature on jihadist governance.¹ But it is now in sub-Saharan Africa, and in particular in north-eastern Nigeria, that jihadists are governing territories. As jihads continue to take root in sub-Saharan Africa, a literature on jihadist governance is emerging,² building on earlier research on how insurgencies govern their relations with civilians and organise their economies.³ Although the issue of jihadist governance is of importance to scholars, it is crucial for political actors who lead the response to jihadist enterprises and must adapt state governance accordingly. This case study, which focuses on a little-known but increasingly important component of one of the factions of the Nigerian jihadist movement often referred to as Boko Haram, the so-called 'Bakura' group⁴, aims to contribute to this debate.

¹ Revkin, Mara. 2020. "What Explains Taxation by Resource-Rich Rebels? Evidence from the Islamic State in Syria." *Journal of Politics* 82, no. 2, 2020: 757–764; Ingram, Haroro J. 2021. "The Long Jihad: The Islamic State's Method of Insurgency: Control, Meaning, & the Occupation of Mosul in Context." Program on Extremism, George Washington University.

² Sandor, Adam and Aurélie Campana. 2019. "Les groupes djihadistes au Mali, entre violence, recherche de légitimité et politiques locales." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 53, no. 3: 415–430.

³ Jean, François and Jean-Christophe Rufin (ed.). 1996. *Economie des guerres civiles*. Paris : Hachette; Teiner, David. 2022. "Rebel Governance: A Vibrant Field of Research." *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, no. 32: 747–766.

⁴ To date, only one brief academic text has been devoted to this group, based on information from the local press and propaganda. See Zenn, Jacob. 2020. "Is the 'Bakura Faction' Boko Haram's New Force Enhancer around Lake Chad?" *Terrorism Monitor* 18, no. 2.

Since 2016, there have been two very different models of governance competing within Boko Haram in the North-East of Nigeria: a decentralised patrimonial model, which combines clientelism, sectarianism and predatory violence against civilians; and a rationalised, bureaucratic and centralised model, which attempts to govern and regulate the behaviour of fighters more precisely and intensively, maintain proper relations with Muslim civilians and run an organised tax system. This streamlined model of jihad has allowed the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), the Nigerian jihadist faction linked to the Islamic State, to gain a foothold, even pushing Abubakar Shekau – the leader of the other faction, the Group for the Propagation of Sunnah and Jihad (Jama’atu Ahl as-Sunnah li-Da’awati wal-Jihad, JASDJ, in Arabic), the real name of the movement often referred to as Boko Haram – to his death in May 2021. Originally a simple dissidence, ISWAP is now the group that controls the most territory and fighters in the Lake Chad Basin. But despite the decisive advantage this rationalisation seems to confer, some jihadist groups continue to resist, defending Shekau’s predatory model. Ibrahim Bakura Doro’s group is the main one, and Bakura, a mere junior officer (*munzir*) in 2016, took over the leadership of the entire JASDJ between late April and early May 2022. The aim of the present piece is to understand the background of the Bakura group and the reasons that have led them to reject the rationalisation proposed by ISWAP so far, and with vigour.

To shed light on the Bakura group’s journey, this text relies primarily on interviews conducted by the two authors between 2020 and 2022 – sometimes together, sometimes separately – with several dozen former members of one or another Boko Haram faction who had passed through programmes set up in Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon to encourage defections of jihadist fighters. Interviews with these defectors represent a breakthrough in accessing information about the internal functioning of Nigerian jihadism. Many of these defectors speak openly, probably because they consider themselves ‘cleared’ – in this regard, they are quite different from the jihadists interviewed in prison. They are very well informed about jihadist factions, at least up to the moment of their defection, but this is sometimes long ago, since they have often spent a long time in detention or semi-detention before being reintegrated into society. There is therefore a ‘delay’ effect: repentants are

Glossary of Arabic and Hausa words

<i>amir ul fiya</i>	area commander
<i>fay’</i>	loot taken from civilians
<i>ghanima</i>	loot taken in combat against armed adversaries
<i>imam</i>	prayer leader
<i>kafir</i>	unbeliever
<i>mai gida</i>	family head (in Hausa)
<i>munzir</i>	junior officer
<i>murtad</i>	apostate
<i>qadi</i>	Islamic judge
<i>qaid</i>	senior officer
<i>shura</i>	advisory council
<i>wali</i>	governor
<i>takfir</i>	practice of declaring another Muslim to be a nonbeliever and thus an enemy of Islam
<i>yara</i>	children (in Hausa)

often less informed about recent developments. Some of them, however, still have contacts with friends or relatives within one or another of the jihadist factions.

The break-up of 2016: The birth of the Bakura group

Jihadism in Nigeria has experienced internal tensions almost from its inception.⁵ But of all the tensions, it was the one that emerged in 2016 that was most significant. It was from this rupture that the Bakura group was born.

In 2015, the IS was gaining momentum globally, while in north-eastern Nigeria, Abubakar Shekau was increasingly being criticised by some of his commanders for his failures in the face of the Nigerian counter-offensive.⁶ Under pressure from critics, he pledged allegiance to the IS, and JASDJ changed the name to become ISWAP. But Shekau's failure to implement the directives of the IS fuelled internal criticism, especially as he remained unable to turn the tide against the Nigerian army.⁷ His opponents explained their various grievances at length, but the central issue – and the one that ex-militants interviewed immediately mention – was his attitude towards Muslim civilians.⁸ Over the course of the conflict, he came to consider Muslim civilians who had not pledged allegiance to him as unbelievers (*kafir*) or apostates (*murtad*), and that it was permissible to condemn (*takfir*) them and therefore kill, pillage, ransom or enslave them. Shekau's critics deemed this posture both unlawful and unwise.

In the early months of 2016, some of these critics – including Habib Yusuf (aka Abu Musab al-Barnawi), the son of the movement's late founder, Mohamed Yusuf, and Mamman Nur, an influential preacher – left the Sambisa Forest, where Shekau was headquartered. They went to the jihadist camps in the Lake Chad area, where they would find key military and religious leaders who were secretly sympathetic to their cause, or at least willing to listen to them.⁹

Once in the Lake Chad area, Nur and Yusuf worked hard to explain their position by organising meetings and circulating audio tapes. They emphasised their privileged – and real – link with the IS.¹⁰ With the support of the lake's main military leaders – the area commander (*amir ul fiya*), Abubakar Mainok, and four of his five senior officers (*qaid*) – they rallied the bulk of the troops.¹¹ However, there was some reluctance. Ibrahim Bakura Doro, then a *munzir*, was one of them. He gathered a few hundred men and left the area of

⁵ Thurston, Alex. 2018. *Boko Haram. The History of an African Jihadist Movement*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 169–172.

⁶ International Crisis Group. 2016. "Boko Haram sur la défensive?" *Africa Briefing* 120, 4 May 2016.

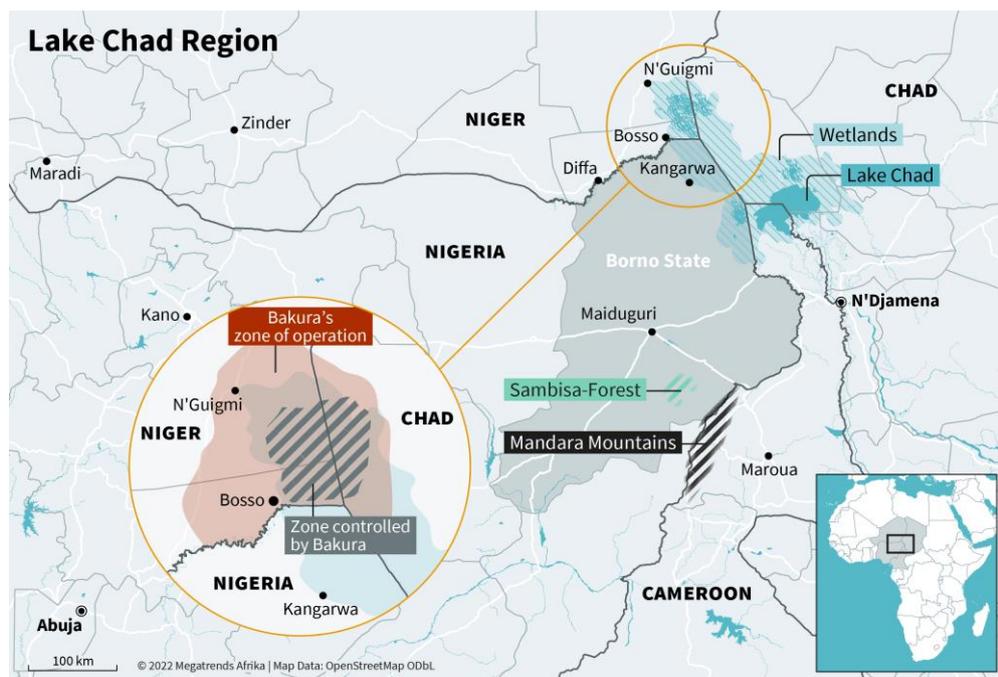
⁷ Foucher, Vincent. 2020. "The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad", *Commentary Africa*, International Crisis Group, 29 October 2020.

⁸ See, for example, Kassim, Abdulbasit and Michael Nwankpa (ed.), *The Boko Haram Reader. From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State*. Chapter 72. Oxford Academic.

⁹ After Nur and Yusuf had left Sambisa clandestinely, Shekau had notified the military commander (*amir ul fiya*) of the Lake Chad area, Abubakar Mainok, by audio. On the way, Nur sent an audio explaining his position to Mainok, who agreed to receive him. Group interview, ex-combatants ISWAP and Bakura, Diffa, 11 August 2022.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Foucher, Vincent. 2021. "Last Words of Abubakar Shekau: A Testament in the Politics of Jihadi Extraversion", *Sources. Material & Fieldwork in African Studies*, no. 3: 1–27.



Kangarwa, in the heart of jihadist-held territory, for a peripheral area in the north, on the border between Chad and Niger.¹² For a time, fighters could move from one group to another without hindrance.¹³ Some disgruntled fighters joined Bakura, including several religious leaders, notably Bakura Sahalaba, a prominent Islamic judge (*qadi*).¹⁴ Other malcontents went their separate ways, including Mallum – the only *qaid* in the Lake Chad area who refused to follow Nur and Yusuf – who initially set up his own camp, independent of Bakura.¹⁵

As early as May 2016, Nur and Yusuf's group and the Bakura group began conducting separate operations, attacking certain military posts in an attempt to capture military equipment. In Niger Bakura attacked the area around the town of Bosso on two occasions, but lacking equipment, the attack had little success. A few days later, on 27 May, it was Yusuf who scored a resounding success in Bosso, prompting the Nigerien garrison to flee. This victory provided him with considerable spoils and enhanced his credibility in the eyes of the IS, which reported about the operation in its media.¹⁶ Proof that the lines were still blurred at the time, Shekau reportedly "sent a message to give instructions regarding the loot taken during the Bosso attack".¹⁷ The Bosso victory, which gave Nur and Yusuf a decisive advantage, was probably a turning point. The two groups clashed several times soon after, particularly over the control of military hardware, before Nur and Yusuf proposed a truce, which lasted a few months.¹⁸

¹² Interviews, Yunus, ex-combatant of ISWAP and Bakura, Diffa, 11 March 2022; Nur, ex-combatant ISWAP, Diffa, 11 March 2022; and Abu Sadiq, ex-combatant ISWAP and Bakura, Diffa, 9 March 2022. All names given to respondents are pseudonyms.

¹³ Interview, Abu Usman, ex-combatant ISWAP, Diffa, 12 August 2021.

¹⁴ The partial homonymy between Bakura Doro and Bakura Sahalaba, which causes confusion among analysts, is purely coincidental and does not indicate a relationship between the two men.

¹⁵ Mallum, who has since been fatally wounded in combat, was of Buduma ethnicity, an indigenous group in the Lake Chad area. He had recruited extensively from Buduma communities, many of whom sought to protect themselves from jihadist abuse by bringing some of their young men into their ranks. However, it is inaccurate to reduce the Bakura group to defenders of Buduma interests. Like ISWAP, the Bakura group is communally composite.

¹⁶ The jihadists reportedly captured several dozen vehicles and a considerable quantity of weapons on this occasion; interview, Abu Abbas, ex-combatant ISWAP, Maiduguri, 4 March 2020.

¹⁷ Interview, Bukar, ex-combatant ISWAP, Diffa, 20 April 2022.

¹⁸ Interview, Baba, ex-combatant Bakura, Diffa, 16 November 2021; group interview, ex-combatants ISWAP and Bakura, Diffa, 11 August 2022.

At the time of the 2016 breakup, the IS was asked to mediate the dispute between Shekau and his critics. The IS held consultations, including, on at least one occasion, by video conference, and eventually made its judgment: It was indeed Nur and Yusuf who were doctrinally right. At the beginning of August 2016, the official weekly of the IS, *Al-Naba*, published a long interview with Yusuf, making official his assumption of the position of ‘governor’ (*wali*) of ISWAP in place of Shekau. Shekau announced shortly afterwards that he was continuing the struggle, reverting to his title of *imam* (prayer leader) of JASDJ.

Shortly afterwards, Bakura visited Shekau in Sambisa. On this occasion, Shekau appointed him as his *amir ul fiya* for Lake Chad. He attested to this in an audio recording that Bakura circulated on his return.¹⁹ Shekau thus placed all his declared supporters in the Lake Chad area, including Mallum, under Bakura’s command, settling the issue of precedence between the two men. Bakura organised his followers under the command of three *qaids*: Mallum to Chad, Mallam Abukar Buduma to the Komadougou Yobe River and Nigeria, and Abu Sumaya to N’Guigmi and Niger.²⁰ Each *qaid* is assisted by several *munzir* (between three and five), who generally control a few dozen men.²¹ According to the fighters interviewed, Bakura had at that time perhaps as many as 2,000 fighters a number that increased when Shekau fighters joined the group after his death.²² As rallies continued, Bakura appointed new *qaid*.²³

Presumably in the hope of reconciliation, the IS insisted in 2016 that Yusuf would not attack Shekau. Indeed, until 2021, ISWAP was content to repel looters from Shekau-held areas – a significant no-man’s-land separates ISWAP from the Sambisa Forest, where Shekau is based. Against Bakura, on the other hand, ISWAP has been much more offensive, with the endorsement of the IS,²⁴ because it is closer and because Bakura and his men harass the civilians that ISWAP taxes, controls and protects. Inter-factional fighting has therefore remained frequent on the lake.

Each of the two groups has thus taken control of a part of the lake, which is not a large open water area but a complex and changing geography of swamps, basins, wooded areas, islands, basins and channels. This is an ideal area for guerrilla warfare, and the armed forces of the bordering countries do not venture there. Even between the two groups, the border has remained remarkably stable. ISWAP exerts influence far beyond the lake, as it controls large areas of forest in north-eastern Nigeria. Both from the lake and from these forests, ISWAP deploys armed patrols and columns, thus impacting a significant part of the rural areas of Borno, which is the north-eastern Nigerian state where the conflict is concentrated.

From its sanctuary in the northern part of Lake Chad, Bakura has less influence, contenting himself with launching attacks around the lake. Initially, following the lead of Shekau, Bakura’s men continued to attack and loot civilians, seizing herds and property, capturing women to “*educate them and then give them in marriage to the fighters*”, and children to “*instil the tradition of the group for the next generation*”.²⁵ But they have also carried out operations against the militaries of the countries bordering the lake, which

¹⁹ Interview, Hassan, ex-combatant Bakura, Diffa, 18 October 2021.

²⁰ Interview, Hassan, ex-combatant Bakura, Diffa, 18 October 2021.

²¹ Exceptionally, some popular *munzirs* can gather many more men. Hassan Faruq, “the most beloved *munzir* of the Lake”, is said to have commanded up to 400 men. Group interview, ex-combatants ISWAP and Bakura, Diffa, 11 August 2022.

²² Group interview, ex-combatants ISWAP and Bakura, Diffa, 11 August 2022; interview Hassan, ex-combatant Bakura, Diffa, 18 October 2021.

²³ Between 2016 and Shekau’s death, Bakura appointed three additional *qaid*: Mallam Hassan, Banaa and Abu Fatima. Mallum, who died of injuries sustained during the assault on the Chadian army in Bohoma, was replaced by one Abdullahi.

²⁴ Interview Abu Fatima, ex-combatant ISWAP, Diffa, 15 September 2022.

²⁵ Interview Hassan, ex-combatant Bakura, Diffa, 12 October 2021.

is one of the few and best ways to obtain the necessary weapons. Finally, since around June 2018, Bakura has been conducting kidnappings for ransom, a practice that has subsequently become widespread, almost to the point of replacing looting.²⁶

The rationalisation of jihad and its critics

Bakura and the militants who joined him in 2016 made a bold choice, one that was both a risky choice and a minority choice of the militants, as the bulk of the Lake Chad jihadists rallied around Nur and Yusuf. Those we were able to interview explained their choice as owing to a number of factors – loyalty to Shekau, to whom they had pledged allegiance; their concerns about the divisions within the movement; and their lack of familiarity with Nur and Yusuf, “people who are considered strangers”.²⁷ But they mentioned another factor above all: their concerns about the way the two men govern. As one ex-combatant from Bakura said:

“The difference is that with Nur, people are controlled. Every movement, everything the person does. This is not the case with Bakura. There is more freedom.”²⁸

Another former member of the Bakura faction explains:

“(…) as far as I am concerned, I chose to follow Bakura, because he did not put too much pressure on people, unlike the Nur camp, where every move is controlled. In Nur’s camp, it is the leaders who authorise people’s movements. Nobody is free, they decide for the people. But with Bakura, it’s the opposite. People have the possibility to go everywhere and they can do it carrying their weapons”²⁹

In another interview, the same fighter continues:

“On the Bakura side, there is more freedom. The fighters are more respected. The person can do things, and if you make a mistake or an error, the punishment is not as severe as in the Nur camp. In Nur’s camp you always have to report, wait for an order. Nur wanted control over everything.”³⁰

The freedom to “go everywhere” with one’s weapons, without waiting for permission, is the concrete example that this former fighter gives. The militants who chose Nur and Yusuf are more explicit – and very disparaging – about the motivations of Bakura’s supporters:

“Almost all the people who went to Bakura, they are ignorant, people who have no religious knowledge. They are attracted by material goods. Among the Nur, there was no such tendency to raid, to go and take the goods of the population. In Bakura, this was not forbidden.”³¹

For ISWAP supporters, access to loot was the primary and fundamental reason behind the choice of Bakura’s supporters. Others put it in a slightly more neutral way, contrasting the autonomy enjoyed by Shekau’s *munzir* and *qaid* with the tight controls put in place by Nur and Yusuf:

²⁶ Electronic communication, humanitarian worker specialising in security issues, 13 August 2022.

²⁷ Telephone interview, Bakar, ex-combatant ISWAP, Diffa, 28 April 2022.

²⁸ Interview, Abu Sadiq, ex-combatant ISWAP and Bakura, Diffa, 9 March 2022.

²⁹ Interview, Hassan, ex-combatant Bakura, Diffa, 12 October 2021.

³⁰ Interview, Hassan, ex-combatant Bakura, Diffa, 18 October 2021.

³¹ Interview, Abu Muhammad, ex-combatant ISWAP, Diffa, 12 August 2022.

“In Lake Chad, for anything, you need permission, and the leaders need to understand why [before granting authorisations]. Before [under Shekau], people were just doing as they wished. You would have munzir going for their own fay’ [loot; see below]. In Lake Chad [under ISWAP], you need to ask for permission. The munzir asks his qaid, the qaid asks the amir ul fiya, etc. In Sambisa, they do what they like.”³²

Another former ISWAP fighter confirms the coercion of fighters in the ‘Nur system’:

“Some people couldn’t stand the Nur system. It prevented everything. Taking people’s property. (...) They said that everyone must manage to support themselves, to work. Bakura allowed people to hold people for ransom.”³³

The testimonies make it possible to clarify the differences between the organisational model proposed by Nur and Yusuf and that of Shekau (and therefore Bakura). Four main features can be noted here. First, Nur and Yusuf replace Shekau’s personal leadership with a collective leadership model, in which the *shura* – a council that brings together a small number of religious and military leaders – plays an important role. Second, a chain of command is put in place to validate and control the actions of local leaders, who then lose much of their autonomy. Moreover, the looting of civilians, referred to in the Islamic law interpretation of the IS as *fay’*, is forbidden when it concerns Muslims – looting Christian civilians as well as agents and collaborators of the state is allowed, but the proceeds from the looting must be returned to the organisation; combatants can still benefit from the largest share of the loot taken in combat against armed adversaries, which is referred to in Islamic law as *ghanima*.³⁴ Finally, a reasonable and bureaucratised system of taxation is put in place, with the issuing of tax receipts and the setting up of patrols and roadblocks to collect taxes and check receipts.³⁵

Nur and Yusuf’s programme can be summarised as aiming to move the jihad from a patrimonial model – marked by Shekau’s personal power and the conflation between the organisation’s treasury and the Prince’s treasury – to a model that could be described as more rational and bureaucratic, to borrow from Max Weber’s definitions.³⁶ Shekau exercised personal, violent and conspicuous but inconsistent power based on favour – in this case the allocation of looting opportunities (weapons and command functions). This form of government had little internal oversight, left much to be desired and thus created opportunities for skilful or well-connected fighters to accumulate power. At the same time, it created a lot of tension, uncertainty and mistreatment, as Shekau punished certain leaders, especially when they seemed to be gaining too much power. For their part, Nur and Yusuf proposed a more rationalised model and attempted to regulate behaviour in a more coherent and precise manner through a bureaucratisation of the organisation.

Nur and Yusuf built their model in stark and explicit opposition to Shekau’s model. The respective roles of global influences and local actors in this development remain unclear for the moment, but it is certain that the global jihad has played a part. Some Nigerian militants had spent time in the 2000s and early 2010s with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and were able to import AQIM’s governance thinking – including its gradualist approach and rejection of *takfir* – into Nigeria. Other connections and exchanges followed. Yusuf spent time in the Arab world for training following the 2009 insurgency, in which his

³² Telephone interview, Umar, ex-combatant ISWAP, 15 August 2022.

³³ Interview, Bukar, ex-combatant ISWAP, Diffa, 9 March 2022.

³⁴ On the distinction that the IS, inspired by Islamic law, makes between *ghanima* and *fay’*, see Johnston, Patrick B., Mona Alami, Colin P. Clarke and Howard J. Shatz. 2019. “Return and Expand? The Finances and Prospects of the Islamic State after the Caliphate”, Rand Report, chapter 3.

³⁵ Interview Abu Mariam, ex-combatant ISWAP, Diffa, 24 March 2022.

³⁶ On the ideal type of bureaucracy, see Max Weber. 2013. *La Domination*. Paris: La Découverte, 63ff.

father was killed. Arab jihadists linked to the IS stayed with Shekau for several months in 2014–2015, encouraging bureaucratisation – a development that Shekau largely sabotaged, sensing that it challenged his patrimonial style of governance. He even managed to drive away those troublesome advisers to whom Yusuf was close.³⁷ No doubt there was a connection between Nigerian militants who understood that Shekau’s sectarian and predatory model would completely cut off the movement from the civilian population, and the IS, which had a bureaucratic inclination.

As soon as they arrived on Lake Chad, Yusuf and Nur banned attacks on Muslim civilians. They did so without compensating the loss of income that this measure entailed for the fighters.³⁸

Q: “So, they compensated the fighters for their loss?”

A: “When you go for something of religion, you have to sacrifice for the religion. You cannot benefit from religion. It is not about benefiting. They told us like this. They told us we would benefit later, when everything is well organised.”³⁹

As this former ISWAP fighter points out, Nur and Yusuf’s solution to this loss of income was first and foremost a call for sacrifice and a long-term vision: The establishment of a moderate and stable tax system was intended to enable the organisation to take care of the needs of the fighters in the long term. For a time, the IS and ISWAP talked about the possibility of paying salaries to fighters, as the IS had done in the Levant at the height of its triumphs. Pay or salary is, as we know, a central aspect of bureaucratic rationalisation as analysed by Weber, as opposed to the allocation of enrichment opportunities not defined *ex ante*. In this case, properly paid combatants are less likely to pursue their own interests and abuse civilians. They can be ‘professionalised’, requiring full-time attendance (with official leave), whereas JASADJ fighters operate on a more flexible basis and can leave for personal matters. It appears, though, that ISWAP attempted to pay salaries only partially and for a short time. However, in the long-term interest of creating a tax base, Nur and Yusuf launched a communication campaign in rural areas where the movement had influence to explaining to Muslim civilians that they could work and trade freely if they paid the required tax and refrained from collaborating with the state.⁴⁰

In the immediate period, however, for junior commanders such as Bakura – who were heavily involved in the fighting, living in direct contact with the combatants and far removed from strategic considerations about the future of the movement – the sudden elimination of the right to *fay*’ plunder was difficult to accept. From this point of view, rank partly explains the alignments, as this ex-combatant suggests, stressing that “it was the leaders who accepted them [Nur and Yusuf], but not the rank-and-file fighters”.⁴¹ It is probably not by chance that only one of the five *qaid* of the lake broke with Nur and Yusuf, while many *munzir* and ordinary fighters joined Bakura, a *munzir* himself. The influx of disappointed ISWAP fighters, which, as we have seen, led Bakura to appoint several new *qaid*s, testifies to the continuing attractiveness of the JASADJ model over the streamlined model of Nur and Yusuf. The tensions that resulted from the implementation of this bureaucratic model did not drive all fighters to Bakura, however: A number preferred to surrender after the Lake Chad states announced, and then demonstrated, that they would

³⁷ See Foucher, “The Islamic State Franchises” (see note 7).

³⁸ Initially, Nur and Yusuf obtained financial transfers from the IS that allowed for some money to be distributed to the fighters, and perhaps even, for a time and in some areas, the payment of monthly salaries. The salary system does not seem to have held.

³⁹ Interview, Umar, ex-combatant ISWAP, Diffa, 15 August 2022.

⁴⁰ Interviews, fishermen, charcoal makers and pastoralists, Maiduguri, 2018–2020.

⁴¹ Interview, Bakar, ex-combatant ISWAP, Diffa, 25 July 2022.

accept defectors.⁴² Some jihadists went to Bakura before choosing to defect. Thus, for a number of jihadists, the rationalisation of jihad carried by Nur and Yusuf was so unacceptable and untenable that surrendering seemed a better choice.

It was significant that after Nur and Yusuf arrived on the lake, but before breaking with them, Bakura conducted a *fay*' operation on his own initiative against civilians in the vicinity of the Nigerian town of Kukawa. Threatened with sanctions by his superior, Bakura had only retained his rank of *munzir* thanks to the protests of his men, who were loyal to the good 'boss' Bakura.⁴³ This incident is typical of the logic of plunder and patronage specific to the Shekau model, the central targets of the reforms carried out by Nur and Yusuf: for Shekau, as for Bakura and his men, a good leader is a *mai gida* ('head of the family' in Hausa) who 'supports' his *yara* ('children' in Hausa). He must therefore offer them their share of the plunder or turn a blind eye when they plunder. Fighters describe Faruq, a *munzir* who is particularly popular with his men, as follows:

"As soon as a fighter has a problem, he assists him without delay. For example, there is a reality in the bush: Fighters like to have women, and to have money as soon as they have a problem. If it's money, Faruq takes care of it. And if they want to get married, he has control over all the girls in his base, and he will finance everything. And with him, people eat their fill. He would take from the people and distribute."⁴⁴

It is clear here how Faruq operated within a totally patrimonial logic, relying on the favour, the *ad hoc* generosity of the good boss, rather than on a bureaucratic logic.

The quotes above show clearly the resistance to the rationalisation proposed by Nur and Yusuf, and the attachment of the combatants to a different, non-bureaucratic, political, but also symbolic and moral economy – more violent certainly, but also more flexible, which leaves room for looting. In fact, in the areas where the Bakura faction is present, the harassment of civilians is widespread, even if the forms of this harassment have changed over the years, with a tendency to replace looting with kidnapping for ransom. Perhaps kidnapping for ransom makes more sense around the lake, where the agricultural and fishing rents and the protection ISWAP gives to Muslim civilians mean that there is still a lot of money in circulation. Shekau's remaining supporters in eastern Borno around the Mandara Mountains, areas devastated by a decade of predation, are mostly engaged in what often looks like petty looting, stealing – often violently: a bicycle and a couple of sheep here, a bag of rice and some clothes there.⁴⁵ In the Mandara, this is an economy of survival, where each small group of fighters conducts its own operations to ensure its immediate subsistence. In the vicinity of the lake, on the other hand, the growing practice of kidnapping for ransom is perhaps a partial rationalisation: instead of killing, stealing and capturing individuals to be used as slaves, the means are provided to collect money periodically. It is not clear at the moment whether the kidnappings are controlled by Bakura directly and used to finance the leadership of the movement, or whether each individual commander conducts his own operations separately and keeps the proceeds. It should also be mentioned that the Bakura group collaborates with selected civilians who come from Niger, for example, to fish in the areas they control (Lake Chad is a very productive fishing area, exporting to the whole sub-region) and who can bring goods that the jihadists need.⁴⁶

⁴² Interview, Usman, ex-combatant Bakura, Diffa, 4 October 2021; Abu Adam, ex-combatant Bakura, Diffa, 6 November 2021.

⁴³ Group interview, ex-combatants ISWAP and Bakura, Diffa, 11 August 2022.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ These incidents can be followed on the twitter feeds of Cameroonian observers based in the area such as @SembeTv and @HumPurse.

⁴⁶ Interviews, Abba, ex-combatant Bakura, Diffa, 16 November 2021; and Mansur, ex-combatant Bakura, Diffa, 5 October 2021.

But an ex-combatant from Bakura makes it clear: “They take a little tax but it’s mostly looting.”⁴⁷

Shekau seemed to have understood that the desire for autonomy was a major feature of Bakura’s resistance, for while he maintained a direct link with Bakura – through the exchange of messengers and, for a time at least, through satellite communications⁴⁸ – he allowed him a great deal of autonomy in the management of his group. And while Bakura’s missionaries occasionally brought arms, ammunition and money to Shekau, Shekau reportedly told Bakura to keep his loot for himself and use it to care for his fighters.⁴⁹ For Shekau, the declarations of loyalty from Bakura, who stood in any case even further beyond his control than the *qaid* and *munzir* of the Sambisa, whom he already governed intermittently, were enough. What we have here is a more flexible, less tightly bound and less ambitious governance than that of ISWAP.

Does this mean that Bakura’s supporters are on the side of what economist Paul Collier has called “greed”, that they are driven exclusively by material considerations, that they no longer have any religious-political ambitions?⁵⁰ This is certainly the case for some of them – after all, we know that a number of people originally joined JASDJ for very direct material benefits: protection for themselves and their communities, especially for the Buduma; compensation for debts to the organisation; or explicit financial incentives. But for many combatants, it is perhaps more about what the anthropologist Christian Geffray, in his work on the Mozambican rebellion, called a ‘warrior social body’.⁵¹ This notion refers to an organisation that is produced by and for war and which, in this case, functions thanks to the resonance between a sectarian ethos (religious, as far as Bakura is concerned) and an ultra-violent mode of production: Partly what allows Bakura and his men to continue to fight and commit violence against civilians is that they see themselves as the only true Muslims in the whole area.

Surviving Shekau: The Bakura group since May 2021

Shekau’s death in May 2021 may have seemed like the crowning achievement of ISWAP’s rise against JASDJ. But this victory took on a more nuanced tone a few months later, when ISWAP suffered setbacks against the Bakura group. This resistance is an expression of the persistent refusal by a faction of the militants to accept the rationalisation encouraged by the IS and promoted by Yusuf.

In May 2021, ISWAP broke with its long-standing defensive posture against Shekau by entering his Sambisa Forest sanctuary in force, presumably after having turned some of his *qaid*.⁵² After a few days of pursuit, Shekau, cornered, killed himself by detonating his explosive belt. ISWAP consolidated its hold on Sambisa and rallied a number of Shekau’s commanders and fighters. But as in 2016 in the Lake Chad district, resistance to ISWAP was expressed in two quite different ways: through armed struggle and through surrender. On the one hand, taking advantage of the arrangements put in place by the Lake Chad

⁴⁷ Interview, Abu Yusuf, ex-combatant Bakura, Diffa, 16 January 2022.

⁴⁸ Interview, Abba, ex-combatant Bakura, Diffa, 16 November 2021.

⁴⁹ Telephone interview, Abu Jibrin, ex-combatant Shekau, 13 September 2022.

⁵⁰ Collier, Paul. 2022. “Doing Well out of War: An Economic Perspective.” In *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, edited by Mats Berdal and David M. Malone, Boulder, USA: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 91–112.

⁵¹ Geffray, Christian. 1990. *La Cause des armes au Mozambique: anthropologie d’une guerre civile*. Paris : Karthala-Credu.

⁵² See Foucher, “Last Words” (see note 11).

states to encourage the defection of jihadists, thousands of Shekau's fighters surrendered to the Nigerian and Cameroonian authorities rather than join the ranks of ISWAP. On the other hand, small groups of fighters resisted in the Sambisa, only to be pushed back to the outskirts of the forest, where they still operate.⁵³ More sizeable groups continue to fight in the Mandara mountain range to the east of the Sambisa, on the border between Nigeria and Cameroon. Above all, since the lake incident, the Bakura group has proved to be a formidable opponent. It has been reinforced by fighters from the Sambisa – as a sign of this reinforcement, Bakura has designated three additional *qaid*.⁵⁴ As early as June 2021, Sahalaba – the religious leader of the Bakura group – spoke out to emphasise that the group was continuing to fight and refused to submit to ISWAP. He did, however, call for arbitration by the IS.⁵⁵ Soon enough, Sahalaba was appointed *imam* of JASDJ – Bakura, the warlord, was then judged as lacking the required religious knowledge.⁵⁶

The IS responded to the call, sending missions to facilitate discussions between the two groups, but to no avail.⁵⁷ Since then, the Bakura group and ISWAP have alternated between combat and negotiations. In August 2021, Bakura fighters reportedly launched an attack on Tumbun Gini, a major ISWAP location in the Lake Chad district, and possibly injured Habib Yusuf himself. However, one must be careful with this information – another ex-fighter claims that this is a false report that ISWAP has been circulating to cover up Yusuf's movements.⁵⁸ More recently, in a new round of talks, Bakura reportedly agreed to the unification of JASDJ and ISWAP, but only if it was done under his command – a condition that is obviously unacceptable to ISWAP, which feels it is in a strong position.⁵⁹

Indeed, it seems that – despite the advantages of very difficult terrain and the reinforcements it has received from the Sambisa – the Bakura group is losing momentum. This is perhaps evidenced by the fact that Bakura had Sahalaba executed in March 2022 and, despite Bakura's limited religious education, replaced him as *imam* under the pseudonym Abu Umaymah.⁶⁰ The ex-combatants have various possible explanations for this, not necessarily contradictory: Was it a simple power struggle between the official and de facto leaders? Or a fundamental political disagreement? Was Sahalaba opposed to the general practice of kidnapping for ransom or to the seizure of the proceeds of ransom by Bakura? Or was he discussing a deal with the Nigerian authorities or with ISWAP? In any case, the ambiguous dual leadership between Sahalaba as the official leader and Bakura as the operational leader lasted only a few months – perhaps the patrimonial organisational logic overdetermined this outcome.

⁵³ International Crisis Group. 2022. "After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria's North East." Africa Briefing no. 180, 29 March 2022.

⁵⁴ Only one *qaid* from Sambisa is said to have joined Bakura, who was suspicious and had him executed. The three new *qaid*s appointed by Bakura are all said to be former *munzir*. This seems to support the idea that where the Sambisa *qaid* were more likely to accept the rationalised approach to jihad proposed by ISWAP (and many did), the *munzir*, who occupied an intermediate position, were more reluctant.

⁵⁵ The video (in Arabic) is accessible here.

⁵⁶ Interview, Hassan, ex-combatant Bakura, Diffa, 18 October 2021.

⁵⁷ Electronic communications, ex-combatants Bakura and ISWAP, June 2022.

⁵⁸ Telephone interview, Ali, ex-combatant ISWAP, 8 September 2021; interview, Abu Fatima, ex-combatant ISWAP, Diffa, 15 and 19 September 2022.

⁵⁹ Group interviews, ex-combatants ISWAP and Bakura, Diffa, 10 and 12 August 2022; electronic communications, ex-combatants, 11 May 2022.

⁶⁰ In videos published in April and May 2022, jihadist commanders pledge allegiance in Hausa, Kanuri, Buduma and Arabic to "their Imam Abu Umaymah". Several ex-combatants confirm that Abu Umaymah is Bakura's alias from before the 2016 split. Telephone conversations, former ISWAP fighters and Bakura, May and June 2022.

Conclusion

The rationalisation pursued by Yusuf and Nur and encouraged by the IS has therefore deeply ambiguous consequences. It has made ISWAP a very different organisation from JASDJ, and it has ensured its success, including, ultimately, against JASDJ. ISWAP is now the main jihadist threat in Nigeria and Lake Chad, and it has even recently begun operations in the rest of Nigeria, striking just outside the federal capital, Abuja. But despite its successes, ISWAP is generating real resistance among the jihadists and it is important to understand this. This case study of the Bakura faction suggests that – despite the material and symbolic resources provided by the IS to support this rationalisation – not all fighters and field commanders have shied away from the gradual normalisation of civilian looting that occurred under Shekau, at the intersection of the symbolic economy of *takfir*, the moral economy of patrimonialism and the political economy of guerrilla warfare.

This case study confirms the potential for defection programmes, such as those that the Lake Chad states have attempted to implement with varying degrees of success and resources: For many jihadists, the ISWAP model is effectively a repellent. If the state proves to be a benevolent *mai gida* – a boss willing to fulfil its obligations – they are likely to defect. Of course, these programmes need to be sufficiently well organised so that these jihadists do not come to consider that ISWAP is not such a bad organisation after all. The campaign against kidnapping, which has become a central feature of the Bakura group, also needs to be strengthened. This requires raising awareness and improving relations and communication between civilians and the security forces while recognising and mitigating the very serious risks associated with these relations, as both jihadist factions violently punish civilians who collaborate with the state.

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