



AFTER THE CAT HAS
REACHED ITS NINTH LIFE,
**WHAT'S NEXT FOR
THE BOKO HARAM
INSURGENCY?**

MAY 2021



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BACKGROUND

For the seventh time since the start of the insurgency in the North-East, the longstanding leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, has been declared dead.

The major difference this time, however, is that the death did not come at the hands of the Nigerian military but after a clash¹ with its splinter faction the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Authoritative sources say that ISWAP fighters had attacked Shekau's base, overpowered his bodyguards and were trying to force him to relinquish power in a meeting when he detonated a suicide vest he had on, killing himself and the ISWAP leadership at the meeting. Both factions have increasingly clashed over territory as a result of sustained aerial bombardment of the Lake Chad Islands by the Nigerian Airforce, which has forced ISWAP to seek cover in the Mandara Mountains in Southern Borno, home to the JAS faction.

WHAT NEXT FOR THE BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY?

Shekau's "latest death" is a turning point in the 12-year old insurgency. It is the first in terms of a leadership change in his own faction, Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād, since the death of its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009. The only challenge to Shekau's leadership was in 2016 when following his pledge of allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the ISIS leadership appointed Abu Musab al-Barnawi to lead Boko Haram. His refusal² to accept al-Barnawi's leadership led to the splitting of Boko Haram into ISWAP and Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah (JAS), the official name of Boko Haram.

¹Boko Haram Strongman, Shekau, Dead As ISWAP Fighters Capture Sambisa Forest
²Collective Mobilisations in Africa / Mobilisations collectives en Afrique



We do not know yet who will succeed Shekau as the leader of Boko Haram, or even if Boko Haram will continue to exist considering that the reports of his death also say that ISWAP has captured³ the Sambisa Forest base of their rivals. If that holds, it will likely mean that many of the surviving Boko Haram fighters will be integrated into ISWAP, even if not immediately.

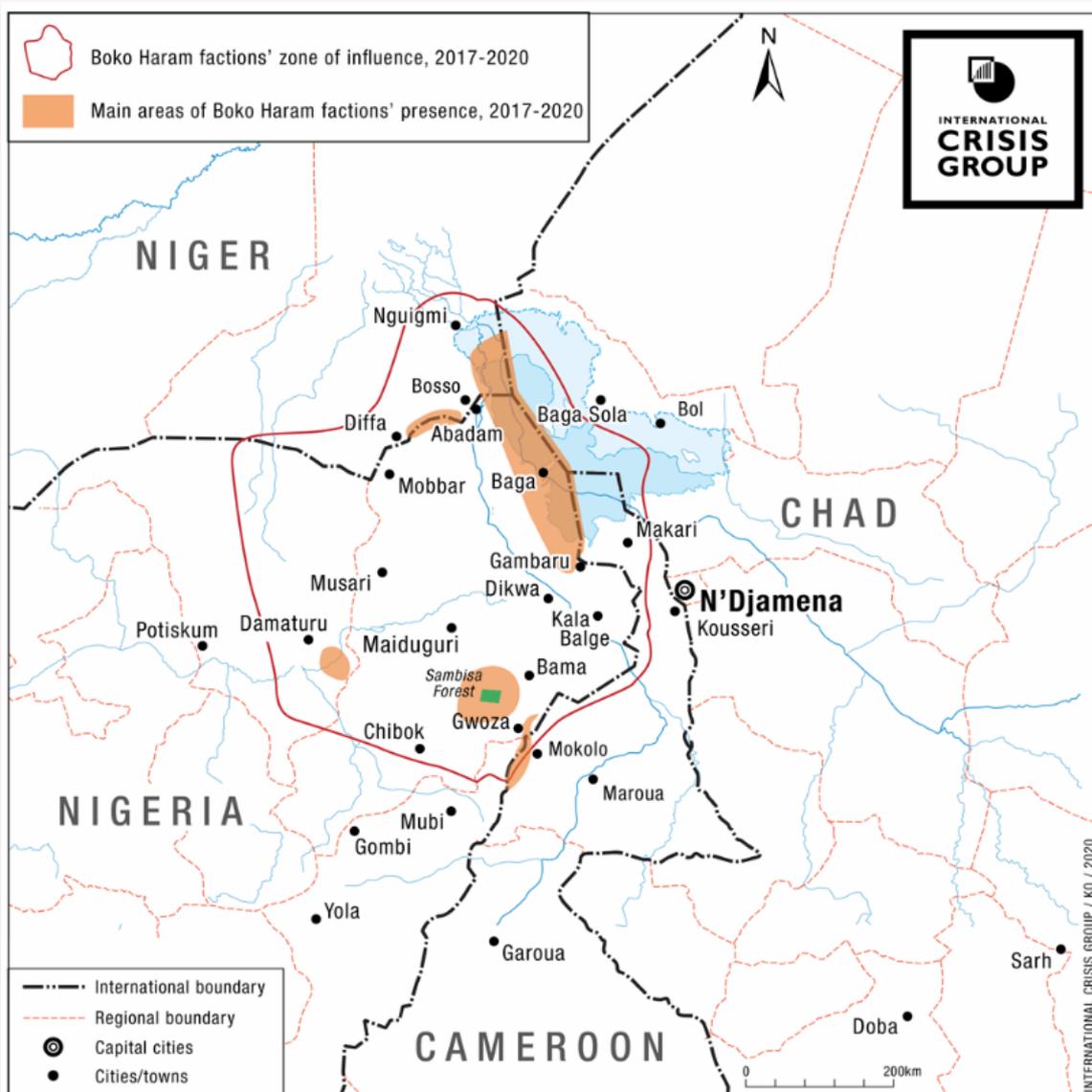


Figure: Boko Haram factions, areas of sustained presence and influence.

Source: International Crisis Group

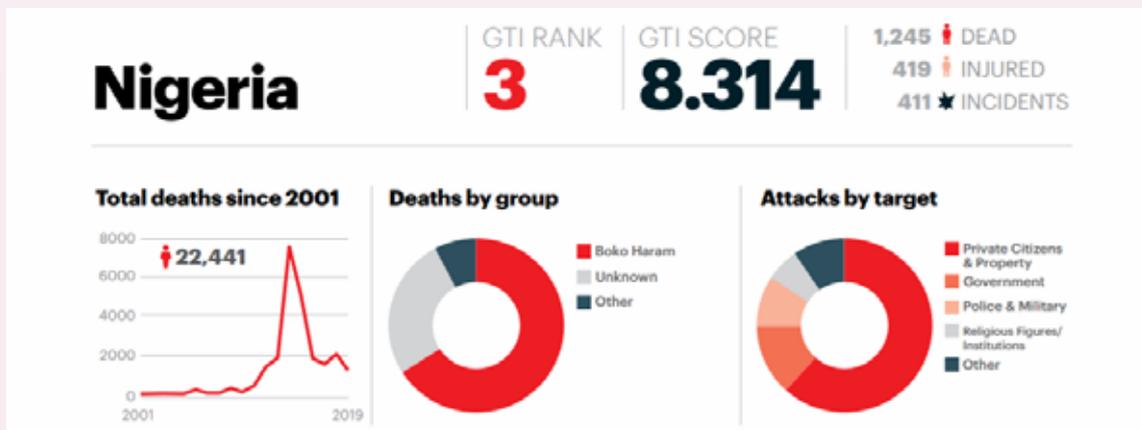
³Boko Haram leader, Shekau, dead as ISWAP fighters capture Sambisa forest –Report



Both factions have often described each other as renegades, denoting an unwillingness to reach a compromise. This fits into the ISIS worldview in which there cannot be two Caliphates operating side by side.

They have indeed taken the step of pronouncing a *takfir*⁴ on the JAS faction.

However, there is the possibility of some Boko Haram fighters refusing to join ISWAP and leaving the Sambisa Forest area, with Ansaru cells in the North-West as a likely destination or continuing as Boko Haram. If they join Ansaru, itself a splinter Boko Haram faction, the group will be strengthened in its resurgence. The group was dormant from 2016 until January 2020⁵ when it claimed responsibility for an attack on the convoy of the Emir of Potiskum on the Kaduna-Zaria road, which killed 30 persons, including six Nigerian Army soldiers.



Source: Global Terrorism Index report

If they continue as Boko Haram, they could be starting afresh or joining an already existing cell of the group. There are already reports of Boko Haram hoisting its flag in a remote community in Niger State, although the reports do not state which faction of Boko Haram and it is possible that it could be either the ISWAP or JAS faction. In either case, it is known that both factions are trying to make inroads into the region and in addition to a resurgent Ansaru, it is likely to become

⁴Takfir is when one Muslim Declares another an apostate and thus excommunicates him
⁵What is Ansaru? | SBM Intelligence



a new theatre of the insurgency as well as bring about clashes between the rival groups.

For ISWAP, seizing the Sambisa Forest will be a significant plus as it will provide protection from air raids for its fighters currently more exposed in their Lake Chad area strongholds. Also, it brings them closer to garrison towns like Maiduguri and Konduga, and access roads leading to them, giving it chokepoints for Maiduguri and have control of all access roads leading to it. This increases the security risks to travellers and even to Nigeria's military.

Since the liberation of the Islamic State's last stronghold in Raqqa, Syria, in 2015 by a coalition of international forces, multiple Islamist militias have sprung up in North Africa and the Sahel, stretching towards the Horn of Africa, some of them with connections to the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. Although right-wing terrorism has replaced the threat of Islamist terror attacks as the number one terror threat in the United States, the latter remains a problem for Europe and Central Asia. The problem is also resurfacing in Central and Southern Africa, where ISIS affiliates are battling the Mozambican government for control of the mineral-rich Cabo Delgado province, raising concerns in the region.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF SHEKAU'S DEATH FOR THE FIGHT AGAINST INSURGENCY IN NIGERIA

The ISWAP faction had continuously considered the Shekau-led Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah as a distraction to its enterprise⁶ and has desired to have a united front. With Shekau now gone, ISWAP poses a graver threat to an already stretched military for a number of reasons ranging from better coordination to more financing, better network and affiliation to IS.

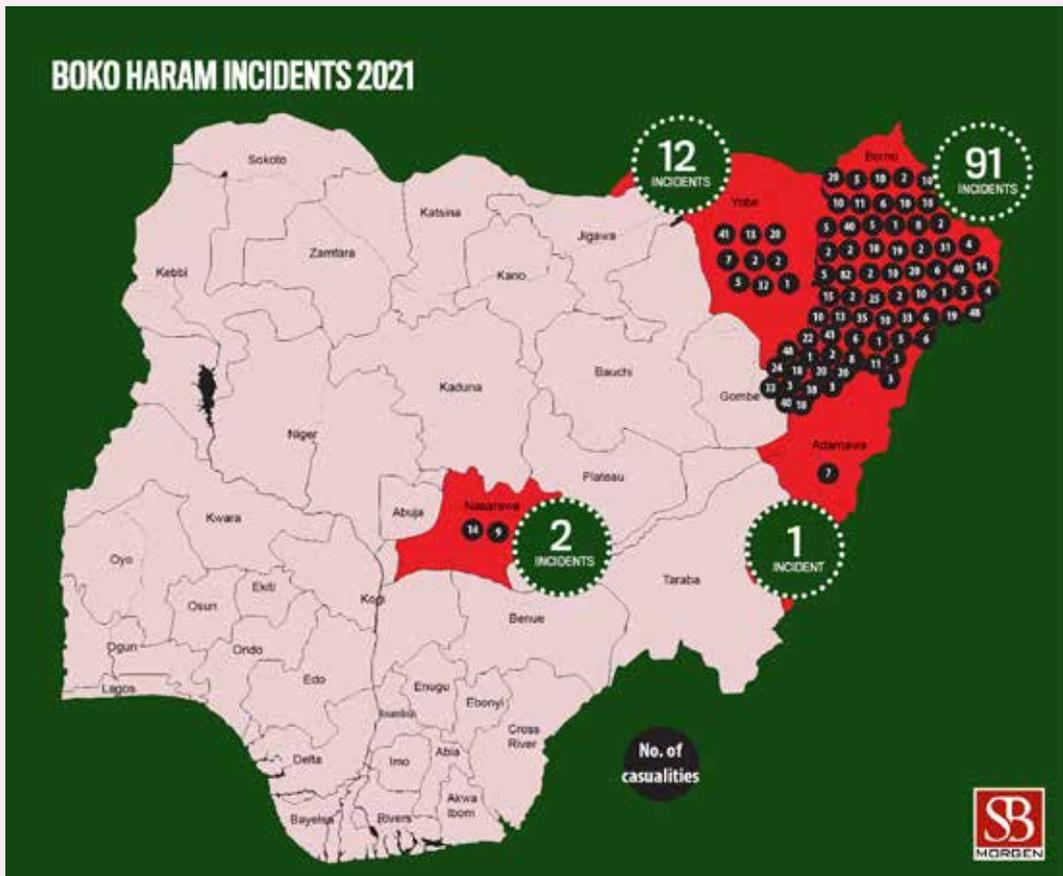
The fact that ISWAP took out Shekau rather than the Nigerian Military raises its status, a position which is not free of problems, however. ISWAP has had a series of leadership crises since its inception, which means this newfound status could lead to more internal squabbles about leadership, which in itself raises the possibility of more splinter factions.

⁶Economics of terrorism in Lake Chad Basin



Another immediate implication of Shekau’s death is that it calls into question the capacities of state actors. With various reports over the years of failed attempts to kill Shekau by the Nigerian military and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), his death in the hands of a “technically defeated” non-state actor is embarrassing for the country’s intelligence and military institutions, and could deal a blow to morale, as well as to the prestige of the institution.

Considering ISWAP’s more clinical approach compared to Boko Haram and its focus on military targets and aid workers, its control of the Sambisa Forest means more problems for the military and the civilian populations in places where they are able to have control over and impose their Islamist rule. Additionally, successful conscription of Boko Haram members would mean that the ISWAP group would be better able to traverse the Sambisa area.





For these reasons, it is important for the military to begin preparations for an escalation in hostilities in the area, and adopt new strategies that will not just sufficiently defend against attacks, but will also take the fight to the terrorists. It is vital that the military finds and targets the leadership of ISWAP as this will have more of an impact than killing off its foot soldiers.

Another clear concern with the ISWAP takeover is that it is a well-connected terror group with access to military-grade equipment, training and financing from across the world. This is likely to be a challenge for the Nigerian government. Tracing and tracking down terror financiers has not proven to be the forte of Nigeria and the country will clearly need more technical support and multinational partnerships to successfully track funds that go to the group.

The objectives of Boko Haram and ISWAP are also likely to be different as well, due to the respective sources of funding. It is accepted by this stage that funding for Boko Haram is local. The Nigerian government claims to be prosecuting what it reported to be hundreds of people in connection with sponsoring terrorism in the country. In ISWAP's case, their funding is not local, so the growth and operations of the group will be harder to stop. Such a scenario presents a greater problem for the government as they cannot lean on local actors to get results in the fight against terrorism.



ABOUT SBM

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