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Boko Haram's Split on Women in Combat

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CO-EXISTENCE

Contents

Overview	3
Introduction	4
The Split	5
Permissible Targets	7
Permissible Attackers	10
Women's Cooperation—or Reluctance?	13
Under the Radar	17
The Full Series	18

OVERVIEW

Ideological disagreements within violent extremist groups are glossed over too often. Groups are analysed as one entity, the implication being that all members agree with their leader's perspective and practices. However, divergences naturally evolve over time as contexts and threats change. Rifts and breakaways ensue.

The Salafi-jihadi group is known for using women as weapons of war, but Boko Haram is divided on the role of female jihadis.

Boko Haram's approach to women in combat is a prime example, and one overlooked in analysis of the Salafi-jihadi group. The Nigerian insurgency is seen as standing as one in its approach to incorporating women in violent warfare, but in reality Boko Haram is split in its interpretations and practices. Two main factions have two opposing views: one allows women to engage in violence and be targeted by violence, while the other condemns such actions. This paper draws on data on the two factions' activities collected by the Institute's Global Extremism Monitor. The example of Boko Haram illustrates the importance of better understanding ideological and tactical nuances when countering extremism.

The views of the authors do not necessarily represent those of the Institute.

INTRODUCTION

Boko Haram, the extremist group that has wreaked havoc in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin for nearly a decade, is often seen as an outlier among Salafi-jihadi organisations when it comes to the role of women. This is a result both of the global outcry over Boko Haram's abduction of 276 girls from Chibok in 2014 and of the group's regular deployment of female suicide bombers.¹ The incorporation of women and girls is a contentious issue within Boko Haram, however. The group is split in its approach. Since August 2016, Boko Haram has been divided into two main groups, one led by Abubakar Shekau and the other by Abu Musab al-Barnawi. The former relies heavily on female operatives, while the latter repudiates the entire principle. Each side gives a contrasting theological justification for its position.

The ideological nuances of Boko Haram's main factions shape their tactics and use of violence. Key differences in their ideology emerged following the 2016 split—chiefly with regard to who is a viable target for violence and what roles women can play. Looking at several case studies, this paper unpacks the question of women's willingness to join or fight for Boko Haram. Efforts to counter Boko Haram's activities, whether by religious scholars, community leaders or others, need to take such differences into account.

¹ "Nigeria Chibok abductions: What we know", BBC, 8 May 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-32299943>; Elizabeth Pearson, "Wilayat Shahidat: Boko Haram, the Islamic State, and the Question of the Female Suicide Bomber", Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency, Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, May 2018, 33, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf>.

THE SPLIT

The ideological stances of the two factions emerged well before the split in 2016, as friction mounted between members under Shekau's leadership. Following the division, these stances shaped each side's tactics and operations. The fracture between the two factions is crucial for understanding opposing views on women and girls in Boko Haram.

The 2016 breakaway was not the first time Boko Haram had been fragmented.² The group has seen infighting in the past, sometimes causing shifts in ranks and among fighters. The first of these splits was around 2003–2004, just a few years after the formation of the group that would in 2009 become Boko Haram, and another occurred in 2011.³ However, the most recent split also created divides when it comes to rules on women. This was the first time that differences on this issue in the group became publicly known.

Shekau, who took over as leader in 2009 after the death of Boko Haram's founder, Mohammed Yusuf, led a guerrilla-style insurgency until 2013.⁴ Then the group engaged in a wider campaign of violence characterised by kidnappings, suicide bombings and contest over territories. In March 2015, Shekau pledged allegiance to ISIS's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who then endorsed the alliance and welcomed Boko Haram as "brothers". This development brought with it the rebranding of the group as Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). It remained under the governance of Shekau.⁵

Before the split, internal friction and long-standing ideological and operational disagreements between the top ideologues of the group—Mamman Nur and Barnawi on the one hand and Shekau on

2 Abdulbasit Kassim, "Boko Haram's Internal Civil War: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism", *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines*, Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, May 2018, 9-24, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf>.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Jacob Zenn, "Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria", *Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point*, February 2014, 7:2, 24, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2014/02/CTCSentinel-Vol7Iss2.pdf>.

5 Freedom C. Onuoha, "Split in ISIS-Aligned Boko Haram Group", *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*, October 27, 2016, http://studies.aljazeera.net/mritems/Documents/2016/10/27/6f2e04352d134832bfb49bf492e0f942_100.pdf.

the other—had reached a turning point. At meetings of Boko Haram’s highest decision-making body, the Shura council, Nur spoke on behalf of those who objected to some of Shekau’s practices. Notable among these were attacks against or using women, but Shekau refused to change his practices.⁶ This, among other internal disagreements, triggered Barnawi’s separation from Shekau. Barnawi then reported his counterpart to ISIS for his brutal and un-Islamic use of violence, seeking the group’s arbitration.

Ultimately, ISIS decided in favour of the Barnawi camp. In August 2016, ISIS newspaper Naba announced that Shekau had been deposed and replaced by Barnawi, who was reported to be the eldest son of Boko Haram’s founder.⁷ Shekau rejected the appointment. He refused to be replaced, vowing to continue leading the insurgency. Barnawi, however, stepped up to the new role and led a breakaway group. The result was two main factions: one led by Shekau, now widely referred to as Boko Haram, and another under Barnawi, often referred to as ISWAP.

Immediately following the split, the two sides engaged in a propaganda war against each other, showcasing their conflicting interpretations of Islamic law. In the ensuing battle of words, the key differences between them quickly became clear. Two of the major sticking points were the permissibility of attacking civilians and the legality of using women and girls to commit attacks. Broadly speaking, Shekau has a more extensive spectrum of viable targets and perpetrators than Barnawi. Understanding this ideology can help inform policy that counters Boko Haram’s violence, even if the factions do not always follow their own rules to the letter. Violent Islamist groups adapt their tactics, and often the ideological justifications for them. As Charlie Winter discusses in another paper in this series, the use of women in battle has been the subject of much debate in the global jihadi movement as whole. The ideologues of ISIS central, to take another example, have increasingly permitted the use of female combatants in battle.

6 “New Boko Haram Leader, Abu Mus’ab Al Barnawi Accuses Abubakar Shekau of Corruption”, accessed 16 May 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86TwFqg-Aqc>.

7 Onuoha, “Split in ISIS-Aligned Boko Haram Group”.

PERMISSIBLE TARGETS

Shekau and Barnawi differ on who is a permissible target in combat. As far as Shekau is concerned, everyone—men, women and children; Muslims and non-Muslims—who is not on board with Boko Haram’s (read his) worldview is a potential target. Shekau has stated,

*I am against the principle where someone will dwell in the society with the infidels without making public his opposition or anger against the infidels publicly as it is stated in the Quran. Anyone doing that can’t be a Muslim, thick and thin. This is what our ideology proved and that is where I stand.*⁸

Elsewhere, referring to Muslims who do not share his views on democracy, secular education and secular society, he has said, “If we identify them, by Allah, we wouldn’t let them live; we will kill them; yes, I said we will kill them because, for us, killing them is (as obligatory) as praying five times a day.” Daily prayer is one of the five pillars of Islam.⁹

While the Shekau faction claims it is permissible, even obligatory, to target everyone who does not profess Boko Haram’s brand of Islam, Barnawi’s followers disapprove of killing non-combatants, especially women and children. It is noteworthy that ISIS sided with Barnawi, even though the group does attack women and children in other parts of the world. Further, ISIS has—or had when its partnership with Boko Haram started—an issue with female perpetrators; recent attacks and ISIS messaging involving women show a shift in ISIS’s stance.¹⁰

Around the time of the 2016 split, Nur, speaking on behalf of Barnawi, replied to Shekau’s position on the use of violence with

8 Hamza Idris, “Shekau Vs Barnawi: The Battle for Boko Haram’s Soul”, Daily Trust, September 11, 2016, <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/news/news/shekau-vs-barnawi-the-battle-for-boko-haram-s-soul/162159.html#UgUejeToUOgohsBE.99>.

9 “SakoZuwaga Jonathan 1 _ Imam AbubakarShekau.flv”, accessed February 14, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNg73vN86K8>.

10 Charlie Winter and Devorah Margolin, “The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State”, Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, August 2017, 10:7, https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2017/08/CTC-Sentinel_Vol10Iss7-9.pdf.

scathing criticism. In a 90-minute audio message entitled “Expose”, Nur gave nine reasons for breaking away. The second was Shekau’s slaughter of civilians. He condemned it, claiming Shekau “kills people that shouldn’t be killed”, such as children, and that he unlawfully plants explosives, “bombing the people even in the mosques”. Ultimately, Nur believes, “In [Shekau’s] creed, [spilling] the blood of everyone who is not with us [Boko Haram] is permissible. We don’t concur with that. This is not our understanding of Islam.”¹¹ Abu Bashir, the head of Barnawi’s Shura council, stated, “We will kill them, both men and women, wherever we find them *because they took up arms against us*.”¹² The reference to women here implies women in the military or vigilante groups and others who actively fight the group, making it a defensive move. Those who neither fought them nor helped in fighting them are not to be attacked. These distinctions, which Shekau does not make, are part of what led to the split.

Responding to the Barnawi faction’s reproach above, Shekau summarised the camps ideological departure on this point: “They said, it is not permissible for me to capture women participating in democracy, to fight them or to handle them as slaves. I replied to them that I will continue to capture and sell them just as our predecessors did. This is my creed.”¹³

These ideological differences manifest themselves in the groups’ attacks. Using data from the Tony Blair Institute’s Global Extremism Monitor (GEM), which tracks violent Islamist extremism, we analysed the two factions’ activity throughout 2017, collecting information on attacks, both attempted and completed, including by Boko Haram and security services, from open-source material.¹⁴ Though a conservative estimate, trends in the data reflect t fact

11 “New Boko Haram Leader, Abu Mus’ab Al Barnawi Accuses Abubakar Shekau of Corruption”.

12 “Boko Haram Gives Reason For Release Of Dapchi Girls, Denies Ceasefire Talks With FG”, Sahara Reporters, 9 April 2018, accessed 17 May 2018, <http://saharareporters.com/2018/04/09/boko-haram-gives-reason-release-dapchi-girls-denies-ceasefire-talks-fg>.

13 Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael NW Ankpa (ed.): *The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State*, London, (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd., 2018), 472.

14 “Violent Islamist Extremism: A Global Problem”, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, September 2018, <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/violent-islamist-extremism-global-problem>.

that t the two factions largely abide by their ideological parameters. Of the more than 50 recorded fatalities involving Barnawi's faction, none was a civilian. Most of those killed were Boko Haram militants or security personnel. Incidents involving Shekau's faction led to a total of 4,064 fatalities in the year. The faction targeted civilians 73 per cent of the time and security services 22 per cent of the time.

PERMISSIBLE ATTACKERS

Not only do the factions disagree on who can be targeted; they also disagree on who can commit attacks. Barnawi condemns the use of women and children to carry out acts of violence. Shekau, however, regularly deploys them. He led the group when it abducted 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014.¹⁵ Nur spoke up against the enslavement of the girls and suggested that they should be wives who have more rights and protection than slaves.¹⁶ In “Expose”, Nur said women and children should be kept at home, fed and catered for. Meanwhile, in an audio Shekau released in 2017 to claim responsibility for an attack on a university, he argued there are situations in which women are allowed to engage in acts of violence.¹⁷

A report published in August 2017 by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point found that at least 56 per cent of the group’s total suicide attacks between April 2011 and June 2017 were committed by women and girls. This number could well have been higher, as the gender of attackers was known in only 72 per cent of attacks during that period. By deploying such a high number of female suicide bombers in that period, Boko Haram became the militia that has used more female suicide bombers than any other.¹⁸

The GEM data collated break down Boko Haram’s attacks in 2017 by faction. The findings show that the groups adhered to their ideological expositions in practice. In 2017, Barnawi’s followers developed their capabilities to carry out attacks, and Shekau’s faction continued its brutality. The data show that Shekau’s faction

¹⁵ Kieran Guilbert, “Women in Boko Haram fighting, not just cooking and cleaning”, Reuters, 3 October 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-boko-haram-idUSKCN1231YI>.

¹⁶ “Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency”, International Crisis Group, 5 December 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/nigeria-women-and-boko-haram-insurgency>.

¹⁷ Audu Bulama Bukarti, “What a Recent Attack Tells Us About Boko Haram’s Ideology”, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 26 January 2017, <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/what-recent-attack-tells-us-about-boko-harams-ideology>.

¹⁸ Jason Warner and Hilary Matfess, “Exploding Stereotypes: Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram’s Suicide Bombers”, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, August 2017, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2017/08/Exploding-Stereotypes-1.pdf>.

was behind 93 incidents involving female suicide bombers. Of these, eight had both male and female cooperation on suicide missions. Some 139 women detonated, and a further 34 were intercepted or failed to detonate. Shekau's attacks by women resulted in 3.1 deaths per attack, according to the data. Operations carried out by men caused marginally fewer deaths, at 2.6 per attack. For Barnawi's faction, there were no suicide attacks (attempted or completed) by women or children, according to the data. This research indicates that the factions have stayed true to their ideological strictures.

The kidnapping in 2018 of girls from the town of Dapchi further demonstrates the difference between the camps. In February 2018, members of the Barnawi faction abducted about 110 girls from their school dormitory in a way that recalled the Chibok kidnapping carried out under Shekau's leadership. About a month later, Barnawi's followers returned their victims to the town from which they had been kidnapped.¹⁹ Explaining the reason for their surprising decision, Abu Bashir, head of the faction's Shura council, drew on the distinction between Muslim civilians who disagree with Boko Haram, who neither fought them nor helped in fighting them, and those who did. He went on to categorise the freed girls in the first class and said, "So we preached to them to repent and released them." When Barnawi's camp returned the Dapchi girls, Shekau's faction was still holding more than 100 of the Chibok girls it had abducted four years earlier. While these cases are not directly comparable, in part because the Chibok girls were largely Christian and the Dapchi abductees Muslim, they allude to the contrasting stances of the two factions.

GEM data collected by show not only that Shekau's faction is more brutal than Barnawi's, killing 78 times more people in 2017, but also that their targets were very different, with a focus from Shekau on civilians. Furthermore, Shekau allows both women and girls to be combatants. This should not be seen as evidence that the Barnawi camp is less dangerous, however. Shekau may be causing more devastation in the short term, but Barnawi is building support in local communities. His is a long-term strategy. Barnawi's faction

¹⁹ Audu Bulama Bukarti, "How to Stop Boko Haram's Kidnappings", Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 23 March 2018, <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/how-stop-boko-harams-kidnappings>.

acts as a defender against Shekau and government forces, administering some territories.²⁰ Given that Boko Haram is committed to a violent jihad, large-scale violence will continue as long as either faction operates. Barnawi's followers are not calling for an end to the bloodshed; they advocate targeted violence against the state and Christians.

²⁰ Audu Bulama Bukarti, "The Battle for Hearts and Minds in the Lake Chad Basin", Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 24 May 2018, <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/battle-hearts-and-minds-lake-chad-basin>.

WOMEN'S COOPERATION—OR RELUCTANCE?

The fact that Shekau permits female combatants does not mean that all women who fight for his faction do so willingly. Neither does it follow that Barnawi's female members have chosen to join his faction because they agree with its interpretation of Islamic law and doctrine. When Boko Haram abducted the Chibok girls, they were converted to Islam and recruited to the group. The world responded in outrage and demanded their release. For two years, little was heard of the girls before one of them was found in May 2016. Some of the girls managed to escape or were released in groups of varying sizes. More than 100 are still unaccounted for.²¹ Some of the abductees decided to stay with Boko Haram, however.

In 2017, the Nigerian government, with the help of Switzerland and the International Committee of the Red Cross, struck a deal for the release of 83 of the girls. One of them refused to leave the group after being brought to the scene of the transaction, saying, "No, I'm happy where I am. I have found a husband."²² While kidnapping is clearly a case of forced recruitment, this example raises important questions about the ideological pull factor on the group's members and the cooperation of women active in Boko Haram.

In another example, Boko Haram released a video in May 2017 showing four of the Chibok girls covered from head to toe in traditional Muslim dress. Their spokesperson Maida Yakuba explained why they refused to return to their parents: "It is because they are in the town (land) of kufr (disbelief). We want them to accept Islam and join us to practice the religion so we may rest in the Hereafter."²³ At the start of 2018, the Shekau branch released yet another video, in which the Chibok girls were shown calling on others to join them:

We are here very happy. We thank God for his mercy on us. You are saying you will come and take us. Where will you take us to?

21 "Nigeria Chibok abductions: What we know", BBC News.

22 "Nigeria Chibok girls: One refused to be released", BBC News, 9 May 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-39857474>.

23 "Chibok Girls Explain Why They Refused To Return To Their Parents", 12 May 2017, accessed 17 May 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5U3hqLlf4g>.

Kufr? May God save us from disbelief. We are the Chibok girls that you are crying to bring back. By God's will, we never return to you.

Possible explanations for this could be the deep identification with captors referred to as Stockholm Syndrome, or a fear of stigmatisation on returning home.²⁴ Equally, some captives may become convinced by Boko Haram's narratives and convert willingly. Nonetheless, in the video, speaking about their freed schoolmates, the anonymous speaker said,

*We sympathise with our colleagues who chose (to go back to) Nigeria. God had mercy upon you and brought you to the dawla [Arabic for state], but you abandoned that and chose kufr. You will regret it on the Day of Judgement.*²⁵

At the end she thanked Shekau for marrying them off and for looking after them. She prayed for him and urged her parents and everyone to convert to Boko Haram's version of Islam and migrate to the so-called caliphate.

These cases show how Boko Haram uses women and girls in videos. It is impossible to ascertain whether the videos were shot under duress, and there is no question that many of the abductees have opposing views to those expressed above. Still, the fact that one of them refused to return in the presence of negotiators who were taking her 82 classmates home—when she had the choice to go home—indicates there might be some willing partakers. Additional evidence supports this. There are reports of women who migrated to the Boko Haram caliphate with their husbands or families, and others who joined alone, some travelling hundreds of kilometres. Reasons cited for joining the group include religious motivations, such as the opportunity to study the Quran, the offer of marriage or the alleviation of financial pressures.²⁶

²⁴ Mia Bloom and Hilary Matfess, "Women as Symbols and Swords in Boko Haram's Terror", *Prism a Journal of the Centre for Complex Operations*; Washington, 6:1, 2016, 113.

²⁵ "Boko Haram Releases Videos Showing Some of the Remaining Chibok Girls Who Vowed Not to Go Back Home", 15 January 2018, accessed 17 May 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRfrLXPi8N8>.

²⁶ "Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency", International Crisis Group.

There are further examples of women and girls who act under duress, with undue influence or drugs. In April 2017, the United Nations Children’s Fund released a report detailing how 117 children, mostly girls, were manipulated, drugged or coerced into suicide missions.²⁷ Some are suspected to be Chibok girls. The report concluded that the girls were “victims, not perpetrators”.²⁸ The story of Amina, who was abducted aged 16, forcefully recruited and deceived into detonating a bomb—something she ultimately did not go through with—is just one example.²⁹ Her account of being forcefully married off to a commander contradicts Yakuba’s claim that Boko Haram only officiate consensual marriages.³⁰ The account of Khadija Ibrahim is an example of how Boko Haram drugs women and children and sends them on dangerous missions. Ibrahim said she was abducted and taken to an unknown destination by two militias who gave her a lift on her way to hospital. Her kidnappers drugged her and strapped her with explosives. They wanted her to attack a market about 480 kilometres from where she was abducted. Ibrahim fled from the kidnappers and was brought before the police.³¹

Given that perpetrators often die committing attacks, it is often impossible to determine whether they were coerced. When the security forces intercept attacks, interviews with the intended perpetrators provide more insight. However, even then, narratives of innocence can be peddled to avoid detention.

While only Shekau’s faction uses women in attacks, both Shekau’s and Barnawi’s factions rely on women to ensure the future of the movement, often through raising the next generation of

27 “Silent Shame: Bringing out the voices of children caught in the Lake Chad crisis”, UNICEF, 12 April 2017, https://www.unicef.org/wcaro/nigeriairegionalcrisis/UNICEF_Silent_shame.pdf.

28 “Child suicide bombings surge in Boko Haram conflict: UNICEF”, Reuters, 12 April 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-africa-security-idUSKBN17E001>.

29 Hamza Suleiman, “Suicide bomber: ‘Boko Haram paid me N200’”, News Agency of Nigeria, <http://www.nan.ng/news/suicide-bomber-boko-haram-paid-me-n200/>.

30 “Chibok Girls Explain Why They Refused To Return To Their Parents”, Sahara Reporters, 12 May 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5U3hqLlf4g>.

31 Nigeria Boko Haram: “Drugged woman told to bomb market”, BBC News, 23 May 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-36362414>.

combatants and followers, as do other jihadi groups. While recognising the importance of women, neither faction goes as far as giving women leadership positions. This indicates that, like other jihadi groups, however much Boko Haram allows women to be active, and whether or not they participate willingly, the group subordinates women.

The above cases provide only a snapshot of women recruited to Boko Haram.³² However, they clearly show that some women have been drawn into the group against their will, while others join out of agreement with the group's extreme ideology. To prevent more women joining Boko Haram, Muslim scholars and leaders ought to deliberately target women and children with counter-messaging that challenges the group's theological justifications. Ultimately, the extreme ideological stances that permit women's enrolment on any level, from deployment as suicide attackers to raising the next generation of Salafi-jihadis, must be challenged and rebutted. While targeting women is vital, prevention must work to understand and tackle all push and pull factors, one of which may be gender inequality, and therefore men and boys cannot be excluded from this debate.

32 Pearson, "Wilayat Shahidat".

UNDER THE RADAR

With Boko Haram being particularly well known for deploying female suicide bombers, it is important that the two factions and their nuances are recognised both in analysis and in political and military responses. As Shekau's faction is louder, creating global noise in the media and attacking a broader spectrum of people, it is no wonder that Barnawi's faction, busy winning hearts and minds on a local level à la al-Qaeda, is going under the radar.³³ The ideological distinctions between the two factions with regard to women and girls are evident in their tactics. They will shape the future of the movement, and of the region.

³³ Bulama Bukarti, "The Battle for Hearts and Minds in the Lake Chad Basin".

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The Salafi-jihadi group is known for using women as weapons of war, but Boko Haram is divided on the role of female jihadis.

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