



## ACLED Methodology for Coding Boko Haram Factions

Boko Haram is currently comprised of two main factions, each claiming affiliation with or allegiance to the Islamic State (IS). Prior to the split, the group was led by Abubarku Shekau, who pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 7 March 2015, changing Boko Haram into the Islamic State ‘West Africa Province’ (ISWAP) ([BBC, 7 March 2015](#)). Al-Baghdadi accepted the pledge less than a week later, and in late April 2015 the first images of Boko Haram using the new name and IS flag were released through IS-affiliated channels ([Daily Mail, 23 April 2015](#)). However, on 3 August of the following year, IS Levant leadership declared that it had rejected Shekau as the leader of ISWAP, and instead appointed Abu Musab al-Barnawi – a top Shekau lieutenant – as leader of the group ([African Arguments, 20 September 2018](#)). Shekau in turn responded with a video stating that he remained the leader of Boko Haram, using the group’s more formal name of Jamatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawatai wal-Jihad, and also that they would remain loyal to IS ([France 24, 9 August 2016](#)).

Given the above, ACLED considers the Barnawi (or ISWAP) faction to be the main *splinter* Boko Haram group, rather than the main Boko Haram group. This is despite the fact that it is suspected that ISWAP fighters are greater in number and have had more influence on the region over the past few years ([Reuters, 30 April 2018](#)). Since the split between Shekau and Barnawi, there have been a number of reports that both of them have been killed or replaced within their respective groups, particularly among ISWAP. Both in 2018 and 2019, Abu Musab al-Barnawi was said to have been replaced by both Mamman Nur and Abu Abdullah Ibn Umar al-Barnawi (no relation), respectively ([CFR, 17 April 2019](#)) -- with the latter appearing to have been official ([France 24, 15 March 2019](#)). Meanwhile, Shekau has been reportedly killed on a number of occasions as well, only to show up in a video at a later time ([CFR, 26 July 2017](#)). In short, **the reported intra-politics of the Boko Haram groups are often times unreliable or contradictory**. Further, “Boko Haram is far from a unified movement, and there is a pattern of assassination within both factions” ([Campbell, 2019](#)).

Unfortunately, the majority of media in the region does not make a distinction between the two groups; rarely do media reports cite Shekau or Barnawi/ISWAP factions by name – or factions at all – when speaking of the groups, unless it is notable to do so. Activities of the “official” Islamic State (Barnawi) faction are often reported simply as “Boko Haram,” thus prompting many outside observers to not consider the existence of two distinct groups.

Before the splintering of the group, ACLED attributed all references to them as either *Boko Haram - Jamatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawatai wal-Jihad* (prior to 7 March 2015), or *Islamic State (West Africa)* (7 March 2015 – 2 August 2016). Since the split in August 2016, the *Islamic State (West Africa)* actor is used only in cases when source material specifically attributes the event to either ISWAP or the “Barnawi faction”, or if the source used is an official IS channel (e.g. Amaq or Nashir) as it is assumed that the group in reporting is ISWAP. If the faction is not known, or the report simply says “Boko Haram” without denoting which group, the actor “*Islamic State (West Africa) and/or Boko Haram - Jamatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawatai wal-Jihad*” is used. This reflects similar coding methodology used in other contexts of ACLED coverage in which two actors operate in the same area with vague reporting (such as in Afghanistan where reports will refer to simply “militants” in



areas where both IS and the Taliban operate). If reports attribute the event to Shekau's faction specifically, or the source used is the official Shekau media channel (al-Tibyan), then the name of the original group is used ("*Boko Haram - Jama'atu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawatai wal-Jihad*").

**ACLED is only able to identify actors based on information that is reported in the source material;** in the majority of cases, ACLED is not able to attribute events involving Boko Haram to the specific faction responsible given the nature of reporting in the region.