



Version 2 (03.2021)

ACLED Methodology for Coding Boko Haram and ISWAP Factions

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Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province

Boko Haram is currently composed 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 Jamaatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawati 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 Both in 2018 and 2019, Abu Musab al-Barnawi was said to have been replaced by both Mamman Nur and Abu Abdullah Ibn Umar al-Barnawi (no relation), respectively ([CFR, 17 April 2019](#)) – with the latter appearing to have been official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 oftentimes 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 - Jamaatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawati 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 - Jamaatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawati 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 - Jamaatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawati wal-Jihad*).

The emergence of factions within the Islamic State's West Africa Province

In March 2019, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) reconnected to its parent organization, Islamic State Central (ISC). As a result of this, ISC incorporated ISGS into its West Africa Province – “Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyah” ([Crisis Group, 19 May 2019](#)). ISGS shares a media office with ISWAP, and claims related to ISGS operations are made by ISWAP and not by ISGS itself. This means that ISGS is ‘incorporated’ into ISWAP. Despite this, it is easy to distinguish between the operations of both ISWAP factions because of their geographic zones of operation.

The first (the Barnawi faction) operates within the Lake Chad region; ISGS, on the other hand, is active across the Western Sahel in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. As a result, both groups are defined separately within ACLED data. From 22 March 2019 onward, the *Islamic State (West Africa)* actor is split into two factional actors: the *Islamic State (West Africa) – Lake Chad Faction* is used to denote the former *Islamic State (West Africa)* led by Barnawi. This name was chosen over “Barnawi Faction” because it relies less on Barnawi continuing as the leader of the group and more on the group’s zone of operation. Meanwhile, post 22 March 2019, the actor *Islamic State (Greater Sahara)* is coded as *Islamic State (West Africa) - Greater Sahara Faction* to represent the group’s incorporation into ISWAP ([Twitter, 22 March 2019](#)).

As a result of this change, the former *Islamic State (West Africa)* and/or *Boko Haram - Jamaatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawati wal-Jihad* actor noted above -- used in instances when it is unclear whether the Shekau Boko Haram faction or Barnawi’s ISWAP faction is responsible for an event in the Lake Chad region -- is referred to as *Islamic State (West Africa) - Lake Chad Faction* and/or *Boko Haram - Jamaatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawati wal-Jihad* post 22 March 2019.

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)

The integration of ISGS into ISWAP (and into the overall infrastructure of the IS network) is of great importance in light of developments on the ground. Of equal importance is the local context wherein IS-affiliated groups and Al Qaeda-affiliated groups have historically been interconnected. This has been through a combination of kinship, intermarriage, business, and personal ties nurtured within and between these groups since the early 2000s. As a result, both groups have a history of operating according to a logic of coordination and cooperation, sharing a common substratum in the



wider network of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).¹ At the same time, a dynamic balance of power and the shifting of allegiances between the two groups has, at times, caused tensions to mount, resulting in defections, skirmishes, and even deadly clashes. For these reasons, it is often difficult to understand which actor is responsible for an event in areas where members of both groups are active. ACLED uses the ‘dual-actor’ *JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (West Africa) - Greater Sahara Faction* to reflect the complex dynamics of these groups in shared geographic spaces where no other information is provided on which specific group is involved.

Determining specific actors in the greater Lake Chad region by area of operation and other means

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

However, ACLED has endeavored to assign more specific actors, where possible, by assessing several factors that indicate a high likelihood of responsibility. The following steps are taken by ACLED Researchers to further evaluate events occurring in the greater Lake Chad region featuring an unknown Boko Haram faction.

- The event period is reviewed for claims of responsibility by either group.
- Additional information provided by local partners is analyzed for further evidence pointing to a specific group’s involvement. For the Lake Chad region, ACLED often relies on a WhatsApp network of trusted sources developed by our partner [Menastream](#) over several years. Information from these sources is also used to improve events in the Middle East and North Africa / the Sahel. Because of the threat of violence or incarceration faced by local informants in some of the countries in question, the specifics of this list are kept anonymous by Menastream. However the network includes broadly:
 - Journalists from a number of reputable international news agencies, as well as journalists from more local news agencies
 - Regional specialists considered authoritative on the region
 - NGO workers from multiple international organizations
 - Key local informants
- The event location is compared to the most recent area of control maps provided by groups on the ground, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the International NGO Safety Organization (INSO), the Center for Coordination and Liaison (CCL) of Operation Barkhane, and other local sources (see **Map 1** and **Map 2** at the end of the document for an example of maps referenced in 2019 and 2020, respectively). Strong

¹ For example, as part of the co-governed coregency of northern Mali in 2012 by AQIM, Ansar Dine, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)—constituent groups and predecessors of JNIM and ISGS



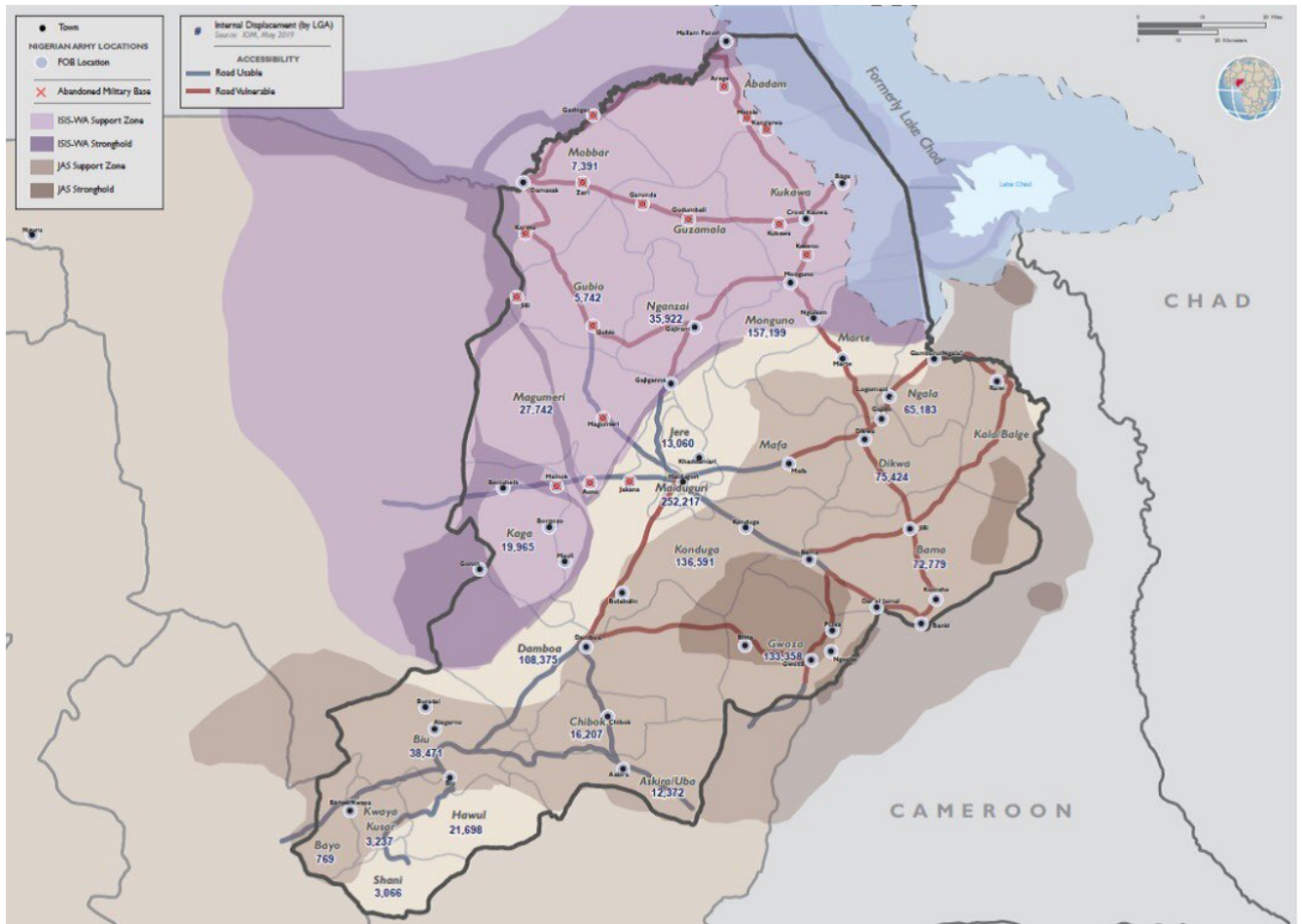
assumptions can be made as a result of the rather clear divide between both factions' respective areas of operations. However, for the few areas with considerable overlap -- such as the Maiduguri area, and along the Ngala, Dikwa, Mafa, Konduga axis -- the dual actor is kept if there is no evidence identifying the faction in reporting.

Summary of coding decisions

- For events dated before the splintering of Boko Haram, ACLED uses either the *Boko Haram - Jamaatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawati wal-Jihad* (all data prior to 7 March 2015) or *Islamic State (West Africa)* actors (7 March 2015 – 2 August 2016).
- From 3 August 2016 to 21 March 2019 (beginning of the Boko Haram split), 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 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 - Jamaatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawati wal-Jihad*).
- From 22 March 2019 onward, the actor *Islamic State (West Africa) – Lake Chad Faction* is used to denote the former *Islamic State (West Africa)* actor. In the Western Sahel, the former *Islamic State (Greater Sahara)* actor is coded as the *Islamic State (West Africa) - Greater Sahara Faction* for the same time period.
- In the Lake Chad region, if the specific Boko Haram faction is not known, or the report simply says “Boko Haram” without denoting a faction, ACLED uses a dual actor: *Islamic State (West Africa)* and/or *Boko Haram - Jamaatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawati wal-Jihad* from 3 August 2016 to 21 March 2019, and *Islamic State (West Africa) - Lake Chad Faction* and/or *Boko Haram - Jamaatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawati wal-Jihad* from 22 March 2019 onward. For such cases, additional research is done in an attempt to associate a specific actor by other means (see **Determining specific actors in the Lake Chad region by area of operation and other means** above).
- For events occurring in territories in which both JNIM and ISWAP-GS are active, and in which the source does not provide strong evidence towards one or the other, the dual actor *JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara)* is used prior to 22 March 2019, and *JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (West Africa) - Greater Sahara Faction* post 22 March 2019.



Map 1



2

² Courtesy of the United States Agency for International Development, May 2019

Map 2

