

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

New Audio Offers Potential Window Into ISWA Decision-Making

Blog Post *by* Guest Blogger for John Campbell

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A bearded man with Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's appearance speaks in this screen grab taken from video released on April 29, 2019. Islamic State Group/Al Furqan Media Network/Reuters

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Abdulbasit Kassim, a leading Boko Haram scholar, recently discovered a thirty-eight-minute recording of a purported Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA) communique, which I translated from the original Kanuri. It provides a particular version and explanation of ISWA's immediate history, and sheds light on why the group executed Mamman Nur, one of the Boko Haram's founding fathers and an influential ideologue, as well as ISWA's internal decision-making and relationship with the Islamic State (IS).

Abubakar Shekau, then leader of Boko Haram, declared allegiance to IS in 2015, renaming his group ISWA. Soon after, Shekau was removed from leadership under murky circumstances and replaced by Abu Musab al-Barnawi as ISWA's leader. (Al-Barnawi has since reportedly been replaced.) With those still loyal to him, Shekau created a separate faction, popularly called "Boko Haram."

Regarding the split in 2016, the audio indicates that several of the groups' leaders, including Nur, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, and a significant number of rank-and-file members secretly defected from Boko Haram after becoming disenchanted with Shekau's "deviations." These included his interpretation of Islamic texts, "thirst" for power, alleged corruption, indiscriminate killing of Muslim civilians, and cruelty toward members. However, Nur and al-Barnawi did not work together to defect at the same time, as some reports have indicated. The recording states that they separately decamped to different groups. Later, Nur joined the al-Barnawi contingent, which went on to become ISWA.

An initial ISWA shura meeting was summoned to nominate a leader following Shekau's ouster, who would then be announced by IS. Nur insisted he was the best suited to lead. The meeting resolved to nominate al-Barnawi, citing Nur's lust for power and lack of credibility in the eyes of some fighters. Nur vehemently opposed al-Barnawi's nomination because of the latter's young age, contending that "a little child's leadership is unknown to the religion [Islam]." This version of events contradicts previous accounts that the Islamic State initially appointed Nur but that he stepped aside in favor of al-Barnawi.

This helps explain the context of Nur's execution. There has been much debate around why it happened, and the communique lists three reasons. First, after he lost his leadership bid, Nur started sabotaging al-Barnawi by spreading rumors and conspiring to destroy ISWA. The audio called Nur "*Shaykh al-Murjifin*" and "*Shaykh al-Munafiqin*"

(the chief of hypocrites, the chief of rumor spreaders). Second, Nur engaged in negotiations with the Nigerian government without the knowledge and consent of ISWA leadership. (It is believed that ISWA was particularly unhappy with Nur's role in the release of the kidnapped Dapchi girls.)


When ISWA got wind of what was going on, it arrested and detained Nur until it received the sum of money he had negotiated from the government (it is not clear what for). After "proving" his second offense with the ransom, Nur was exiled and transferred to a nearby settlement, where he committed his third offense. A day after his exile, Nur attempted to defect and turn himself in to the Nigerian authorities, but he was stopped by ISWA members before he could do so.

Nur was not punished for his first and second offenses, though both of which are punishable by death according to ISWA's interpretation of Sharia. The audio explains that, as a senior founding member and ideologue, executing Nur would have been divisive, especially given that ISWA broke away from Shekau partly over his use of violence against members.

The audio also explains that the decision to execute Nur was ultimately passed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. After Nur's third offense, ISWA reached out to IS seeking guidance. After some messages back and forth, al-Baghdadi opted to have Nur executed as punishment, forgoing the exile or solitary confinement sought by ISWA.

The audio also provided ISWA's justification for executing Nur. First, ISWA "had not any option" but to carry out the caliph's decision. Then it cited Islamic textual authorities to justify killing rumor spreaders (*murjifin*). It also cited the opinions of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim, Islamic scholars often used in Salafi-Jihadism, to buttress the decision. That ISWA produced audio providing an ideological justification is an indication of the importance of ideology, albeit flawed, for the way it operates.

The audio, assuming it is an accurate portrayal of the events described, could be evidence that ISWA sees IS as its umbrella body, seeking and taking its advice, at least with respect to major decisions. The relationship between the two therefore might not just be rhetorical. If so, such a relationship has serious implications for the Nigerian government's planned talks with ISWA, aimed at ending all activities; in his video message, al-Baghdadi made clear that the fight should go on.

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