

# Abū Muṣ'ab al-Barnāwī's Interview with the Islamic State's Al-Naba' Magazine<sup>1</sup>

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## Translator's Introduction:

In March 2015, the Nigerian jihadist group popularly known as Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (also known as ISIS and ISIL). Boko Haram has existed in various forms in northeastern Nigeria and its environs since the early 2000s. The group became notorious after its mass uprising in 2009, and particularly after its kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok in 2014.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 The original is here, dated 2 August 2016, pp. 8-9, [https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/the-islamic-state-e2809cal-nabacc84\\_-newsletter-4122.pdf](https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/the-islamic-state-e2809cal-nabacc84_-newsletter-4122.pdf).
- 2 For background on Boko Haram, see International Crisis Group, "The Boko Haram Insurgency," 3 April 2014, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/west-africa/nigeria/216-curbing-violence-in-nigeria-ii-the-boko-haram-insurgency.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/africa/west-africa/nigeria/216-curbing-violence-in-nigeria-ii-the-boko-haram-insurgency.pdf); Adam Higazi, "Mobilisation into and against Boko Haram in North-East Nigeria" in Kadya Tall, Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, and Michel Cahen (eds.), *Collective Mobilisations in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 305-358; Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, "Nigeria's Interminable Insurgency? Addressing the Boko Haram Crisis," Chatham House, September 2014, [http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field\\_document/20140901BokoHaramPerousededeMontclos\\_0.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20140901BokoHaramPerousededeMontclos_0.pdf); Anonymous, "The Popular Discourses of Salafi Radicalism and Salafi Counter-radicalism in Nigeria: A Case Study of Boko Haram," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 42,2 (2012): 118-144; Andrea Brigaglia, "Ja'far Mahmoud Adam, Mohammed Yusuf and Al-Muntada Islamic Trust: Reflections on the Genesis of the Boko Haram Phenomenon in Nigeria," *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, 11 (2012): 35-44, [http://www.cci.uct.ac.za/usr/cci/publications/aria/download\\_issues/2012/Andrea%20Brigaglia.pdf](http://www.cci.uct.ac.za/usr/cci/publications/aria/download_issues/2012/Andrea%20Brigaglia.pdf); Ahmad Murtada, "Jamā'at 'Boko Haram': Nash'atuhā wa-Mabādi'uhā wa-A'māluhā fi Nayjiriya," *Qirā'āt Ifriqiyya*, November 13, 2012; Kyari Mohammed, "The Message and Methods of Boko Haram" in Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (ed.), *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Ibadan, Nigeria: French Institute for Research in Africa, 2014), pp. 9-32.

Boko Haram's affiliation to the Islamic State reflected Boko Haram's longstanding sympathies for global jihadist thought.<sup>3</sup> The immediate context of the affiliation, however, was Boko Haram's territorial losses to the Chadian, Nigerien, and Nigerian militaries in early 2015. The pledge of allegiance appeared to mark Boko Haram's weakness at that time.<sup>4</sup>

The extent of collaboration between Boko Haram and the Islamic State's Middle Eastern provinces (especially provinces in Syria, Iraq, and Libya) is likely quite limited. The most visible aspect of this collaboration has come in the media sphere. Several months before the pledge of allegiance occurred, analysts of jihadist media production were anticipating it based on an increasing professionalization of Boko Haram's media output and an increasing correspondence between its media style and that of the Islamic State.<sup>5</sup> The interview translated and annotated below represents the highest-profile instance of media collaboration between the two groups – in this case, an Islamic State media outlet interviewing a leader of Boko Haram.

When it was released in August 2016, the interview attracted major media attention because of its implication that a deep leadership split had occurred within Boko Haram. With the interview, the Islamic State appeared to be marginalizing and demoting Abubakar Shekau, who became the group's formal leader after Boko Haram was reconstituted in the aftermath of the 2009 uprising. In place of Shekau, the Islamic State named Abū Muṣ'ab al-Barnāwī as “governor” of its West Africa Province. The interview prompted a fiery exchange of audio messages between

3 See Alex Thurston, *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), Chapter Seven; and Abdulbasit Kassim, “Defining and Understanding the Religious Philosophy of Jihadi Salafism and the Ideology of Boko Haram,” *Journal of Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 16, 2-3 (2015): 173-200.

4 Terje Østebø, “The Virtual Significance of Boko Haram's Pledge of Allegiance to ISIS,” *The Conversation*, 19 March 2015, <http://theconversation.com/the-virtual-significance-of-boko-harams-pledge-of-allegiance-to-isis-38690>.

5 Aaron Zelin, “The Clairvoyant: Boko Haram's Media and the Islamic State Connection?” *Jihadology*, 27 January 2015, <http://jihadology.net/2015/01/27/the-clairvoyant-boko-harams-media-and-the-islamic-state-connection/>.

Shekau and a long-time senior figure within Boko Haram, Mamman Nur, who sided with al-Barnāwī.<sup>6</sup>

The leadership change was accompanied by an effort to say that Boko Haram had changed its posture toward Muslim civilians: in the interview, without denigrating Shekau or acknowledging Boko Haram's massive victimization of Muslim civilians, al-Barnāwī nevertheless implied that the group considers many ordinary Muslims to be believers and therefore to be illegitimate targets for violence. Al-Barnāwī's position implicitly contradicted Shekau's repeated suggestions, especially in the 2014-2015 period, that any Muslim who did not join Boko Haram's fight against the Nigerian state was a *de facto* unbeliever.<sup>7</sup> Al-Barnāwī suggested that Boko Haram will concentrate its violence on the state and on Christians.

Al-Barnāwī's position echoes prior disputes within Boko Haram. In 2012, a splinter group broke off from Boko Haram, calling itself *Anṣār al-Muslimīn fī Bilād al-Sūdān* (The Defenders of Muslims in the Lands of the Blacks, i.e. Sahelian Africa). In its founding charter, *Anṣār al-Muslimīn's* leaders wrote, "Whoever prays the five prayers, and turns his face in the direction of prayer (*istaqbal al-qibla*), and manifests Islam is a Muslim ... We do not issue a ruling against him of unbelief, or corruption, or heretical innovation except when the necessary [condition] is firmly established."<sup>8</sup> *Anṣār al-Muslimīn*, however, appeared to have a limited impact in terms

6 Shekau's message is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chIBAwlKf0k>, and Nur's is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86TwFqg-Aqc>. Nur's message was widely attributed to al-Barnāwī.

7 See, for example, Abubakar Shekau, "Message to the World on Baga," January 2015, <http://jihadology.net/2015/01/21/new-video-message-from-boko-%E1%B8%A5arams-jamaat-ahl-al-sunnah-li-dawah-wa-l-jihad-imam-abu-bakr-shekau-message-to-the-world-on-baga/>.

8 *Jamā'at Anṣār al-Muslimīn fī Bilād al-Sūdān*, "Mithāq Jamā'at Anṣār al-Muslimīn fī Bilād al-Sūdān (The Charter of the Society of the Defenders of Muslims in the Lands of the Blacks)," 2013. Available at: <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/jamc481at-ane1b9a3c481r-al-muslimc4abn-fibilc481d-al-sc5abdc481n-22the-charter-of-jamc481at-ane1b9a3c481r-al-muslimc4abn-fi-bilc481d-al-sc5abdc481n22.pdf>. An English translation of fair quality can be found here: [https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/jamc481\\_at-ane1b9a3c481r-al-muslimc4abn-fi-bilc481d-al-sc5abdc481ne2809cthe-charter-of-jamc481\\_at-ane1b9a3c481r-al-muslimc4abn-fibilc481d-al-sc5abdc481ne2809d.pdf](https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/jamc481_at-ane1b9a3c481r-al-muslimc4abn-fi-bilc481d-al-sc5abdc481ne2809cthe-charter-of-jamc481_at-ane1b9a3c481r-al-muslimc4abn-fibilc481d-al-sc5abdc481ne2809d.pdf).

of drawing fighters away from Boko Haram. The current effort by al-Barnāwī could prove to be a more serious turning point for Boko Haram.

Who is al-Barnāwī? He appeared in a January 2015 video as a spokesman for Boko Haram,<sup>9</sup> but little else is certain about him. His name is a pseudonym, with the surname meaning simply “the Borno-an,” referring to the precolonial Muslim polity of Borno (for which Nigeria’s present-day Borno State is named). The first name translates as “the father of Muṣ'ab,” and could be a form of homage to Islamic State forefather Abū Muṣ'ab al-Zarqāwī (1966-2006). Many analysts believe that al-Barnāwī is Ḥabīb Muḥammad Yūsuf,<sup>10</sup> who is reportedly the second son of Boko Haram founder Muḥammad Yūsuf (1970-2009).<sup>11</sup> If true, this genealogy could give him a particular legitimacy for Boko Haram followers. Yet curiously, al-Barnāwī makes no mention of this patrimony in the interview – the precise context where one might expect him to do so.

As noted above, the leadership dispute dominated initial Western media coverage of the interview. Yet the interview is relevant for several additional reasons. First, there is al-Barnāwī’s description of Boko Haram’s history, which he streamlines for media consumption. Second, there is the interviewer’s seeming ignorance of Boko Haram’s activities and history, and the interviewer’s repeated references to gathering information about Boko Haram from the Western media – perhaps suggesting that the Islamic State’s own leaders and propagandists receive limited information from

9 Jamā'at Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wawa-l-Jihād/Al-'Urwa al-Wuthqā, “Liqa' ma'a al-Mutaḥaddith al-Rasmī li-Jamā'at Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihād ḥawla Aḥdāth Madīnat 'Bāqā' (Interview with the Official Spokesman of [Boko Haram] about the Events in the City of Baga),” January 2015, <http://jihadology.net/2015/01/27/al-urwah-al-wuthqa-foundation-presents-a-new-video-message-from-from-boko-%E1%B8%A5arams-jamaat-ahl-al-sunnah-li-dawah-wa-l-jihad-interview-with-the-official-spokesma/>.

10 Surnames among northern Nigerian Muslims often follow one of two patterns. Some surnames are the name of the person’s place of origin, as in “Abū Bakr Shekau,” who hails from Shekau village in Yobe State, Nigeria. Other surnames are the person’s father’s name. Hence “Muḥammad Yūsuf” is effectively, “Muḥammad, son of Yūsuf.”

11 For example, CNN, based on anonymous sources, has made this claim. See Stephanie Busari, “Boko Haram’s New Leader Is Son of Executed Founder, Insider Says,” CNN, 4 August 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/08/04/africa/nigeria-boko-haram-leader/>.

Boko Haram. Third, there are al-Barnāwī's descriptions of the military campaign against Boko Haram, including al-Barnāwī's allegations of considerable participation by Western surveillance drones and airplanes. Finally, there is al-Barnāwī's attempt to delegitimize the humanitarian relief effort in northeastern Nigeria by presenting the effort as a vehicle for attempted Christianization of Muslim children.

Overall, al-Barnāwī's rhetorical strategy is to reframe the overall conflict as one of Boko Haram against an alliance of states and Christians. In a way, such a message is nothing new for Boko Haram, which has long sought to position itself as the voice and defender of Muslims in northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad region.<sup>12</sup> Boko Haram has long worked to invoke historical examples of Muslim-Christian conflict in Nigeria. What is distinctive is al-Barnāwī's emphasis on reducing the hostility that Boko Haram has shown toward Muslim civilians – in most of Boko Haram's messages since 2009, one can detect an increasing willingness to brand ordinary Muslim civilians as unbelievers and legitimate targets. Al-Barnāwī, in other words, is trying to reverse a longstanding trend toward greater and greater exclusivism within Boko Haram.<sup>13</sup>

### Translation

[Introduction by *Al-Naba'*]: In his first interview with *Al-Naba'* magazine after he took over as governor (*wāliyan*) of West Africa, Abū Muṣ'ab al-Barnāwī – may God protect him – discusses the history of jihad in this region, and the situation of the soldiers of the Islamic State in the province in the shadow of the African-Crusader campaign (*al-ḥamla al-ifrīqiyya al-ṣalībiyya*) against them. The shaykh also responds to some of the distortions stirred up around the West Africa Province, and reveals the reality of the military situation in the shadow of the struggle between

12 For a discussion of how Boko Haram presents itself and Nigeria's Muslims as victims of the state and Christians, see Alex Thurston, "The Disease Is Unbelief: Boko Haram's Religious and Political Worldview," The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper Number 22 (January 2016), [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Brookings-Analysis-Paper-Alex-Thurston\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Brookings-Analysis-Paper-Alex-Thurston_Final_Web.pdf).

13 See Thurston, "The Disease Is Unbelief," for more on how Boko Haram's politics of victimhood interacts with its religious exclusivism.

God's soldiers (*junūd al-Raḥmān*) and Satan's allies (*awliyā' al-Shayṭān*) in the forests of West Africa.<sup>14</sup>

[Al-Naba']: The call of monotheism in West Africa is old. Tell us about the history of the monotheists and their jihad against the polytheists there, and about the efforts of the monotheists in conducting jihad against the Crusaders in that region.

[Al-Barnāwī]: Praise to God, Lord of the worlds, and blessings and peace upon his trustworthy Messenger. So: to begin, I thank the brothers in the [Islamic] State's media, and those who support their efforts and their defense of the *mujāhidīn*'s lands, and for their stance in the face of the infidel media. And I urge them to expend more [effort] and not neglect it, for their profession has no less importance in this war than the military side. I also thank *Al-Naba'* magazine for giving me the opportunity to defend our dear State, and to refute the fabricated distortions against West Africa Province in particular.

To respond to your question, the history of the monotheists in West Africa goes back to the first century *hijrī* and, it is said, after that, for Islam entered this region and many local people embraced it. But afterwards many people went astray and followed heretical innovations (*bid'a*), polytheistic customs, and distortions. The region experienced ages of vacillation and error.<sup>15</sup> Then came the infidel occupation to make mischief

14 The reference here to “the forests of West Africa” hints at an unconscious racism on the part of the interviewer. The stock image of Africans living in “jungles” and “forests” circulates not only in the West, but also in the Arab world. Boko Haram has indeed had a substantial presence in rural areas in northeastern Nigeria and the surrounding countries, but the insurgency has also had a major urban component.

15 Several scholars have convincingly demonstrated that Boko Haram makes rhetorical use of Nigeria's precolonial history, particularly by invoking the memory of Shaykh 'Uthmān Dan Fodio (1754-1817) and the Sayfawa Dynasty of the Kanem Empire and its successor state, Bornu. See Kassim, “Defining and Understanding”; and Atta Barkindo, “How Boko Haram Exploits History and Memory,” Africa Research Institute, 4 October 2016, <http://www.africaresearchinstitute.org/newsite/publications/boko-haram-exploits-history-memory/>. Al-Barnāwī's remarks here, however, are a reminder that Boko Haram discusses Nigeria's past in different ways according to Boko Haram's aims in any given statement. Here, al-Barnāwī bypasses both Dan Fodio and the Sayfawa and instead positions Yūsuf as the savior of Islam against a backdrop of “vacillation.”

in the land and destroy the civilization. Sometimes it forced people into unbelief, and sometimes it seduced them and enticed them.<sup>16</sup> After a century, the universal Sunna of God (*sunnat Allāh al-kawniyya*)<sup>17</sup> came and God renewed people's religion for them. Shaykh Abū Yūsuf al-Barnāwī<sup>18</sup> – may God have mercy upon him – began calling people to monotheism. That was one year after the blessed raid on Manhattan.<sup>19</sup> He called people to commit themselves to the Sunna and cast off polytheism and blameworthy innovations that God had not authorized.<sup>20</sup> That infuriated the Crusaders and their apostate henchmen and they repressed the call of monotheism with all their haughtiness.<sup>21</sup> That was the reason for the return of jihad in this region. The *mujāhidūn* expended efforts in fighting the Crusaders and standing against them. And they thwarted their plans to Christianize the Muslims (*taṣṣīr al-muslimīn*), praise God.<sup>22</sup>

16 Anti-colonialism is key to Boko Haram's message. One obvious aspect is Boko Haram's signature stance – its rejection of Western-style education. Another aspect, however, is the idea that Nigeria's elite, Muslim and non-Muslim, was morally corrupted by colonialism and its lingering effects.

17 He means Salafism; Salafis treat being Sunni and being Salafi as completely contiguous.

18 He means Muḥammad Yūsuf.

19 The Islamic State has dealt in a somewhat subtle way with the history of al-Qā'ida, and here al-Barnāwī partly adopts their framing. The basic narrative is that Osama Bin Laden was a righteous and pure leader, but that his successors are deviant and self-serving.

20 During this period, Yūsuf presented himself as a mainstream Salafi, part of the Ahl al-Sunna tendency in Nigeria, and not as an avowed jihadi.

21 This may be a reference to the crackdown by northeastern Nigerian authorities on the Boko Haram hardliners who had established an enclave near Kannama, Yobe State in 2003.

22 Here al-Barnāwī introduces the newest iteration of Boko Haram's message, although he works (not entirely disingenuously) to tie it back to Yūsuf's original preaching. The new iteration is that Boko Haram is defending Nigerian Muslims and nearby Muslims against a conspiracy, spearheaded by Western powers and the Nigerian state, to "Christianize" them. Al-Barnāwī, to the extent that he expects anyone in Nigeria to read the interview, is attempting to awaken longstanding fears within the northern Nigerian Muslim community about anti-Muslim campaigns – witness recent episodes of backlash in northern Nigeria, especially since the 1990s, against issues as diverse as vaccination campaigns, anti-Islamic films from abroad, and Christian evangelization in the north. Such developments do not mean that northern Nigerian Muslims have been "radicalized" as a group, but they do mean that Boko Haram sees some prospects for broadening its appeal.

[Al-Naba']: Tell us about the history of the society “Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihād”: its founding, and the most important developments through which it passed, until its soldiers' announcement of allegiance to the Commander of the Faithful, may God protect him.

[Al-Barnāwī]: The beginning of the society “Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihād” was in the year 1423 *hijrī* [2002-2003], when Shaykh Abū Yūsuf al-Barnāwī established the nucleus of a jihadist society and called people to it. But he did not begin his work of jihad directly, even though he announced that the greatest goal of the society was jihad.<sup>23</sup> The call won great acceptance among the Muslims. He did not name the society by any name at that time, until the apostate government assaulted the preaching center in Maiduguri named Ibn Taymiyya Center.<sup>24</sup> The leader of the society, Abū Yūsuf – may God have mercy on him – was the most prominent of those martyred in that aggression. And so the society collectively decided to pledge allegiance to Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Shikawī,<sup>25</sup> to become in that way a leader for the society. At that time, he gave it the name “Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihād.” They began combat operations on the ground, and the society passed through many stages and developments in its jihadist journey. Among the stages through which it passed are: its swift effort to save its imprisoned members who

23 This framing projects some coherence onto the early Boko Haram that may not have obtained at the time. First, it seems that Boko Haram emerged gradually in the early 2000s (Yūsuf was becoming prominent in Borno State politics by 2001, and Boko Haram appears to have coalesced by 2003), rather than as an organization founded on a particular date or even in a particular year. Second, Yūsuf appears to have been conflicted about the goals of his organization. On the one hand, he sought religious and political recognition in Borno State and beyond. On the other hand, he was connected to hardliners who wanted to organize a separatist, proto-jihadist community – which some of his followers did in 2003 in Kanamma, rural Yobe State. It is possible to see Yūsuf as a jihadist organizer with a gradualist approach, but I view him as someone who improvised heavily and did not initially intend to fight the state.

24 Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) is a figure with immense popularity among both non-jihadi Salafis and Salafi-jihadis. He was a major influence on Yūsuf.

25 This is the only reference to Shekau in the interview. At no time does al-Barnāwī explicitly reject or criticize Shekau.



were captured in the first attack on the society,<sup>26</sup> and also sending its soldiers to the great desert to train there,<sup>27</sup> and also its transition to the stage of guerrilla war (*ḥarb al-'iṣābāt*) to the stage of consolidation (*al-tamkīn*) and the extension of control.<sup>28</sup> The most prominent of those developments was the historic development that completely startled the world, and that was the announcement of its allegiance to the Caliph of the Muslims, the Qurashī,<sup>29</sup> may God protect him.

[Al-Naba']: What are the reasons that pushed you all to pledge allegiance to the Caliph of the Muslims despite the great distances [between you and him]?

[Al-Barnāwī]: Among the greatest reasons that pushed us to announce that allegiance were, first: obedience to God and His Messenger in their command for the need for consensus and repudiating sectarianism (*al-tafarruq*). God Most High has said: "And hold firmly to the rope of God together and do not become divided (*tafarruqū*)" [Quran 3:103]. And [the Prophet], on him be blessings and peace, said in responding to the

26 Here, al-Barnāwī refers to a series of prison breaks that Boko Haram staged as it regrouped following the July 2009 uprising. The most dramatic was at Bauchi Central Prison, Bauchi State in September 2010.

27 This may be a reference to training with al-Qā'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), but the phrasing is quite vague.

28 Here, al-Barnāwī seems to be fitting Boko Haram's history into the Islamic State's five-stage theoretical model of jihad. The five stages are: emigration (*hijra*) to a place where jihad is possible; the formation of a jihadist organization (*jamā'a*); the creation of a state of mayhem or "savagery" (*tawāḥḥush*) that destabilizes regimes; the consolidation (*tamkīn*) of territory; and the declaration of the Caliphate (*al-khilāfa*). See the Islamic State, "From Hijrah to Khilafah," *Dabiq* 1 (Ramadan 1435/June-July 2014): 34-40, <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/09-2014/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-Issue-1-the-return-of-khilafah.pdf>. The Islamic State was influenced by Abū Bakr Nājī's *Idārat al-Tawāḥḥush: Akḥṭar Marḥala Sa-Tamurr bi-hā al-Umma* (2004), translated by William McCants as *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Umma Will Pass* (2006), available here: <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abu-bakr-naji-the-management-of-savagery-the-most-critical-stage-through-which-the-umma-will-pass.pdf>.

29 The Islamic State constantly refers to its leader Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī with this moniker in order to stress his (almost certainly fabricated) genealogical connection to the Prophet's Quraysh tribe, and therefore to reinforce his claim to be caliph.

question of Ḥudhayfa<sup>30</sup> – may God be satisfied with him – and as counsel to him, when Ḥudhayfa asked him what he should do if the calamity (*fitna*) of people inviting him to the doors of Hell befell him. [The Prophet], may God bless him and grant him peace, said: “Adhere to the group of the Muslims and their imam.” And Ḥudhayfa said: “What if they have no group and no imam?” And he, may God bless him and grant him peace, said: “Then separate yourself from all those sects and bite the root of a tree until death comes upon you while you are doing that.” As the two imams have reported.<sup>31</sup>

Second, we saw that sound reason obligated the *umma* (global Muslim community) to unite and fight its enemy under one clear banner, just as its enemies are gathering against it. The Muslim community has known nothing but servility since the fall of the caliphate centuries ago, and its honor and glory will not return except with the return [of the caliphate]. So why should we wait to pledge allegiance to it? And who will give allegiance to it and support it if we – the sons of the Muslim community and the bearers of its injuries (*hāmīlū jirāḥihā*) – do not do so?

[Al-Naba']: The infidel, Crusader media attaches the appellation “Boko Haram” to the *mujāhidīn* of West Africa Province, and before it “The Society of Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihād.” What is the source of this appellation, and why do the Crusader media insist on attaching it to you?<sup>32</sup>

[Al-Barnāwī]: This name is part of how the Crusader media slanders the reputation of the *mujāhidīn*. It is a phrase in the Hausa language, the prevailing language here. No one knows it except the Hausa people, and by it they mean “following the Western educational system is *ḥarām*

30 Ḥudhayfa ibn al-Yaman, a companion of the Prophet.

31 The “two imams” here refer to Muḥammad al-Bukhārī (810-870) and Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj (ca. 815-875), compilers of the two most authoritative collections of *ḥadīth* reports in the Sunni Muslim world. The *ḥadīth* of Ḥudhayfa cited here is also cited in Islamic State, “The Concept of Imamah (Leadership) is from the Millah (Path) of Ibrahim,” *Dabiq* 1: 20-23, p. 22. In general, the Islamic State argues that the alternatives are either joining it, or succumbing to unbelief and blind partisanship.

32 I have written about the complexities surrounding Boko Haram's various names here: <https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2013/01/07/boko-haram-whats-in-a-name/>.

(legally forbidden by Islam).” The media have insisted on naming us with it both before and after the pledge of allegiance, in order to frighten the weak-hearted lovers of the West and its ideas away from us.

This appellation appeared first among the general public. On one side, that was a result of their difficulties in pronouncing the true name, and from another side it is an appellation derived from what our scholars frequently mentioned in order to counsel people, especially parents and the students of institutions and universities, and the rest of those concerned with education. So we were nicknamed with it by way of address, reflecting what the man [Yūsuf] mentioned frequently. In any case we are dissatisfied with this appellation and we do not call ourselves by it. Calling us by it is a form of derisive nicknaming. The All-Knowing, All-Aware has forbidden it, and God is our recourse against what they say.

[Al-Naba']: We notice that your operations cross the artificial borders.<sup>33</sup> Can you tell us about the factions and nations that you are fighting today?

[Al-Barnāwī]: Yes, our operations certainly cross them, because we believe that these artificial borders cannot hold us back or block our movement. God Most High has said: “Indeed, My earth is spacious, so worship only Me.” [Quran 29:56] When the little neighboring nations began to make war on us, we extended the scope of the war and we aimed our arrows at them just as they had aimed theirs at us. The little nations that fight us today are Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Benin.<sup>34</sup> The Crusader West finances them and helps them.

[Al-Naba']: Most of the news that we hear is about joint operations for the African alliance (Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Niger). Is there

33 Both the Islamic State and Boko Haram have rejected the legitimacy of boundaries drawn during the colonial and independence periods. Especially since 2015, Boko Haram has routinely targeted Niger (especially the southeastern Diffa Region), Chad (including the capital, N'Djamena), and Cameroon (especially the Far North Province).

34 Benin's participation in the anti-Boko Haram fight is token, and Boko Haram has not attacked Benin. The main determinant here is simple geography: Benin is far to the west of Boko Haram's center of gravity.

participation from the Western Crusader countries in these battles?

[Al-Barnāwī]: Yes, there is participation from those countries. We see the airplanes of those countries, fighter planes and reconnaissance planes, hovering over us densely, especially in their last campaign to expel us from the Lake Chad area and what borders it. Their participation is limited to the sky. They have no effective participation on the ground.<sup>35</sup> God willing, we are preparing a defeat for them. For God, the Greatest, the Restorer, has promised us victory, and He, the Most Exalted, who never breaks the promise, will aid us. The Lord, the Mighty and Majestic, has said, "If God helps you, none can overcome you" [Quran 3:160].

[Al-Naba']: How are the African forces conducting their war against the soldiers of the Caliphate in West Africa Province?

[Al-Barnāwī]: They are conducting their ruthless war (*ḥarbhā al-sha'wā'*) through a shared operations room in Niger. If they want to launch attacks against us, the American and French forces present in Niger sent pilotless planes to observe the area. Then the joint forces undertake attacks under cover of heavy air bombardment. It's worth mentioning that they do not come together on anything except to disagree upon it, for they are as our Lord, may His Glory be extolled, has said: "Their violence among themselves is severe. You think they are together, but their hearts are

35 This is one of the most interesting passages in the interview. If true, it suggests that Western participation in the anti-Boko Haram fight is much greater than publicly acknowledged. It is known, publicly, that the U.S. operates surveillance drone bases in Niger and Cameroon, and has the capacity to station surveillance drones in Chad. France, meanwhile, has bases throughout its former colonies and uses Chad as the epicenter of its Operation Barkhane, a Sahel-wide successor to its Operation Serval against jihadis in northern Mali in 2013-2014. There are also American and European special forces on the ground in limited numbers – U.S. special forces are present in Diffa, Niger and in Maiduguri, Nigeria. See Eric Schmitt and Dionne Searcey, "U.S. Plans to Put Advisers on Front Lines of Nigeria's War Against Boko Haram," New York Times, 25 February 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/26/world/africa/us-plans-to-help-nigeria-in-war-on-boko-haram-terrorists.html>; and Warren Strobel, "In Niger, U.S. Soldiers Quietly Help Build Wall Against Boko Haram," Reuters, 18 September 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-niger-boko-haram-idUSKCN0RI0C020150918>.

diverse. That is because they are a people who do not reason” [Quran 59:14]. And to God is the praise, first and last.

[Al-Naba']: The apostates<sup>36</sup> talk about major victories against the soldiers of the Caliphate in West Africa. What is your response to that talk?

[Al-Barnāwī]: They have seized some of the regions from us and we are working to get them back.<sup>37</sup> We say to them that this should not be considered a victory, and that defeat is surrender and loss of will, and that we – praise to God – believe that it is a trial to purify the ranks (*balā' li-tanqiyat al-ṣaff*). If God wills, we will come out of this more relentless (*aṣlab 'awdan*) and more powerful (*aqwā sā'idan*). The [true] affair is what you see, not what you hear.

[Al-Naba']: The Crusaders, and their henchmen the idolatrous tyrants (*al-ṭawāghīt*),<sup>38</sup> use the weapon of ‘awakenings’ in an ongoing manner against the *mujāhidīn*.<sup>39</sup> Has that happened in West Africa? How have you dealt with it? Or how will you deal with them if they appear?

[Al-Barnāwī]: That has certainly happened. In our country, they are represented in the campaign of sticks. We have finished driving them back, by the grace of God. Now they have no troop force worth mentioning, and God knows best.

[Al-Naba']: What is the campaign of sticks<sup>40</sup> and what are the JTF forces, and what your ruling on them and how do you deal with them?

36 i.e. the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari.

37 i.e. things are going fairly badly for Boko Haram at present.

38 In jihadi thought, *ṭāghūt* (plural *ṭawāghīt*) is a key term for describing regimes that have allegedly committed apostasy. The term simultaneously connotes tyranny and polytheism (i.e. the charge that such regimes have set themselves up as idols for people to worship). Jihadis deploy the concept of *tawhīd al-ḥākimiyya* (the unity of judicature, or the absolute sovereignty of God) in order to label constitutional systems as *ṭāghūt* due to their alleged usurpation of God's absolute political authority.

39 By “awakenings,” the Islamic State usually refers to Western-aligned militias in Iraq and Syria. Here they extend that term to Nigeria's Civilian Joint Task Force (C-JTF), a government-backed civilian vigilante militia that emerged in Maiduguri and Borno State in summer 2013.

40 This is a literal translation of the C-JTF's Hausa nickname ‘*yan kato da gora*, “big men with canes.”

[Al-Barnāwī]: The forces of the JTF, its complete name is the Joint Task Force ... It is an apostate force from the Nigerian army assigned in the year 1433 (2011) the task of fighting the monotheists and exterminating them. It has received – by God's grace – strong blows from the *mujāhidīn*, which ended their utility for their masters, and made them halt it and form another [force].

As for the campaign of sticks, they are “civilian” people. They carry sticks and knives to fight the *mujahidin*. They were conscripted by the forces of the Nigerian army, and given the task of expelling us from the cities. They called them “Civilian JTF.” The majority of them (i.e., the campaign of sticks) left this work after they saw the relentlessness of the *mujahidin* and their refusal to surrender (*ṣalābat al-mujāhidīn wa-'adam istislāmihim*). Only a few of them remain, and their activities are also limited. They can do nothing except guide the tyrants to the *mujahidin*'s positions, because they are local boys (*abnā' al-miṭṭaqa*). We call the surviving remnant of them to repent and turn back to God (*al-tawba wa-l-ināba ilā Allāh*) from the apostasy into which they have fallen,<sup>41</sup> before we overpower them. They will regret it when there is no time for repentance.

[Al-Naba']: It is well-known that the Christians seek to dominate most of Africa. Could you tell us about this subject and especially about the situation of the countries that are fighting you today?

[Al-Barnāwī]: Discussion of this subject has many branches, for the Christians have dominated many parts of Africa. For example, the rate of Christians in “Nigeria”<sup>42</sup> in the early years of the last century was 20%. They lived mostly in the south of the country. Today they have increased their number and they continue – unfortunately – in this increase. Their percentage has approached 35%. They have spread today into the north as well, such that they have regions there where no one who belongs to

41 This call to repent is also somewhat new. Shekau repeatedly threatened them with utter destruction.

42 Boko Haram does not recognize Nigeria's existence as a state, hence the quotation marks.

Islam can come near, even if he bears nothing of Islam except his name.<sup>43</sup> But we, if God wills, are preparing failure and retreat for it. The Most High has said: “Thus Allah shows forth [the example of] truth and falsehood. As for the foam, it vanishes, [being] cast off; but as for that which benefits the people, it remains on the earth” [Quran 13:17].

[Al-Naba']: Christianizing, Crusader activity in West Africa – what is its reality and how are you dealing with it?

[Al-Barnāwī]: Christianizing activity is very large in this country. It is easy for the Christians to seduce many Muslims' children, sometimes with money, and sometimes with the easy life in the West. By that means they are exploiting their material situation, and mostly they do not find anyone who will stand up to them except the small number of *mujāhidīn* and active Muslim scholars. Their reality today is that they are seeking to Christianize the society by force. The apostate government helps them with that. They exploit the situation of refugees in the shadow of the blazing war. They provide them with food and shelter, and then they Christianize their children while they are unaware.<sup>44</sup> As for how we treat it, [we do so] by booby-trapping and bombing every church we can, and killing everyone we can among the subjects of the Cross.<sup>45</sup> That is from one angle. From another angle, we raise the

43 Al-Barnāwī attempts an interesting balancing act here. On the one hand, he wants to present the Christians as a threat to the integrity of Islam in Nigeria, especially in the north; this position gives him an incentive to depict Christians as growing in influence. On the other hand, he gives an unrealistically low estimate for the percentage of Christians in Nigeria – it is likely to be at least 40%. Perhaps al-Barnāwī deliberately underestimates Christians' numbers in order not to make the Muslim community seem too weak.

44 This is another extremely interesting passage. Al-Barnāwī implicitly acknowledges a basic reality, namely that the war has caused a massive humanitarian crisis, driving hundreds of thousands of displaced persons into the homes of relatives, friends, and strangers, and driving thousands more into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Maiduguri and elsewhere. Al-Barnāwī cannot credibly promise that Boko Haram could shelter or care for such people, and so he resorts to accusing the humanitarian community and the state of attempting to “Christianize” IDPs, especially children. Al-Barnāwī's remarks are a desperate, albeit well-calculated, effort to undermine Muslim civilians' confidence in the relief effort.

45 This is the most famous line of the interview. Al-Barnāwī, without explicitly acknowledging that Boko Haram had been deeply invested in predatory actions against primarily Muslim non-combatants, here implicitly promises that

consciousness of the people and warn them against the danger of Crusader organizations, and that they have only come to Christianize their children in the name of aid, and that [Muslims] should not let themselves be deluded by them. [The Muslims'] response has been large, praise God.

[Al-Naba']: In every place in the world, the tyrants' scholars are raising controversies to drive people away from the *mujāhidīn*. What is the biggest specious argument that the tyrants' scholars have raised in the countries of West Africa?

[Al-Barnāwī]: Naturally, it is the specious argument about the Khawārij,<sup>46</sup> and that we kill Muslims and drink their blood, and that we [do X], and that we [do Y] (*wa-annanā naqtul al-muslimīn wa-nashrab dimā'ahum, wa-annanā, wa-annanā...*) God knows that we are not Khawārij. And I am astonished, by God, at an *umma* whose concern no one takes up except "Khawārij"! And within which no one calls tyrants unbelievers except "Khawārij"! And no one defends it from the attacking enemy except "Khawārij!"<sup>47</sup> It is astonishing

Boko Haram will return to an earlier pattern of behavior wherein it targeted Christians without indiscriminately attacking Muslim non-combatants (from 2009 on, Boko Haram has targeted Christians, although its violence against Muslims eclipsed its violence against Christians by 2013 at the latest). Combined with the immediately previous sentences, this portion amounts to a two-pronged appeal to Muslim non-combatants, effectively saying, "We will stop killing you, and we are your defenders against aggressive Christians."

46 "Khawārij," derived from the verb *kharaja* ("to go out"), is a pejorative name for an early Muslim sect that was neither proto-Sunnī nor proto-Shī'ī. For Sunnis, the Khawārij came to be associated with several stances: declaring people unbelievers on the basis of their sins (rather than through a more conservative definition that focuses on whether a person has actually declared something unlawful to be lawful), assassinating Muslims, rejecting legitimate Muslim authority, and causing chaos. Whether such accusations are fair or unfair is not pertinent here – the point is rather that the accusation of *kharijism* is routinely leveled at Salafi-jihadis. The accusation stings because it portrays Salafi-jihadis not as the ultra-Sunnis that they wish to be, but as troublemakers who stand completely outside of Sunni Islam and who do not understand the technical, legal processes one must follow when directing the accusation of unbelief at another Muslim. For one discussion of the politics of this label, see Jeffrey Kenney, *Muslim Rebels: Kharijites and the Politics of Extremism in Egypt* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

47 Here al-Barnāwī is being sarcastic. He argues that mainstream Sunni scholars are too cowardly and too subservient to take up the cause of Islam, and so such scholars resort to calling Islam's true defenders "Khawārij."



how that *umma* has satisfied itself with subordination and servility (*al-tab'iyya wa-l-khunū'*), and that no one in it lifts his head except to throw [the accusation] of Khārijism?! If you live a month, you'll see a marvel. And we will continue fighting unbelief in all its denominations and creeds until the coming of the Hour. Our column is marching and the barking of the dogs will not hurt it. And we say to the scholars of the royal court (*'ulamā' al-bilāṭ*), and to the priests of the Sultan, those whose cacophonies (*nashāzahum*) we never hear except in opposition to the *mujāhidīn*, but as for when it comes to the crimes of the Crusaders in all the Muslims' countries, they are deaf and dumb and we never hear a sound from them – we say to them: die in your rage, and bite your fingers from rage, break them and eat them, for your errant fatwas, which you release from the palaces of the idolatrous tyrants (*min quṣūr al-ṭawāghīt*), will never stop us.

[Al-Naba']: The media stir up a lot of news about how the soldiers of the province carry out bombing operations at mosques and markets and the like. Is it part of your approach to conduct bombings among the mass of people who belong to Islam? And do you say that the nature of people in the abode of newly added unbelief is unbelief [i.e., do you say that people who live in a formerly Islamic area, now ruled by unbelievers, are themselves unbelievers] (*hal taqūlūna inna al-aṣl fī al-nās fī dār al-kufr al-tāri' huwa al-kufr*)?<sup>48</sup>

[Al-Barnāwī]: God be praised that you have directed this question at me, for I have so longed to clarify and teach people our reality and the reality of these actions. The [Islamic] State has forbidden targeting the mass of people who belong to Islam, and it is innocent of that action. Everyone who does this, does it for himself, not in the name of the Caliphate – may God strengthen it – and it does not claim responsibility for this kind of thing.<sup>49</sup> As for us, God

48 For an introduction to how jihadis discuss different “abodes,” including the idea of *dār al-kufr al-tāri'*, see Joas Wagemakers, “A Crash Course in Jihadi Theory (Part 4),” *Jihadica*, 14 February 2011, <http://www.jihadica.com/a-crash-course-in-jihadi-theory-part-4/>.

49 These sentences sound like an implicit rebuke and disavowal of Shekau, although it is important to reiterate that he is not named here. Al-Barnāwī is effectively lying here – both Boko Haram and the Islamic State have killed Muslim civilians, including Sunnis.

knows, and our soldiers know, that we do not say that the nature of people who live in the abode of newly added unbelief is unbelief. Likewise, we do not say that their foundation is Islam. Rather, with whoever manifests Islam and does not manifest one of the things that violates it, we do not declare him an unbeliever, let alone declare his blood lawful.<sup>50</sup> We have fought against this transgression (*al-ghuluw*) so much and we continue to fight it. Building on that, we do not target the mosques of the mass of people who belong to Islam, or their markets.<sup>51</sup>

[Al-Naba']: The Western media talk about the increase in the number of the Islamic State's soldiers in West Africa. Could you tell us about the most important reasons that have pushed the youth to head for battle and join your ranks?

[Al-Barnāwī]: Praise God, the situation is as they have told you. The most important reasons that have pushed the youth to head for battle are, first: they have witnessed the soldiers of the Caliphate as they are composing the most magnificent pages for the [history of the] *umma*, and their stance in the face of the most arrogant Crusader campaign has restored self-confidence to the entire Muslim community. It has made the youth flock to the field of jihad. Second, among the important reasons that have pushed the youth to flock to us, is the sway of the tyrannical rulers over the lands of Muslims, and how they fight any manifestations of Islam. [It is] thanks to their injustice and their betrayal and their tyranny over them.

[Al-Naba']: How do you evaluate the situation of West Africa Province in the shadow of the Crusader war against it?

50 Here al-Barnāwī depicts belief as a matter of individual behavior, rather than circumstance. He does not inflict upon individual Muslims, as Shekau does/did, an absolute choice between aligning with the state or aligning with Boko Haram.

51 Again, al-Barnāwī is effectively lying here, unless he is speaking only for himself and fighters directly under his command – in which case he is probably still lying, as such fighters have doubtless participated in operations where Muslim civilians have been killed, including in mosques and markets. Notable mosque bombings by Boko Haram include an attack in November 2014 at Kano's Central Mosque, which killed over 100 people; and multiple attacks on mosques in Maiduguri, the birthplace of the movement.

[Al-Barnāwī]: It is doing well, praise God. It is still strong and persevering, by God's grace. It remains – by God's permission – a thorn in the throats of the Crusaders and the apostates.

[Al-Naba']: Are there any messages you would direct at Muslims generally and at mujahidin specifically?

[Al-Barnāwī]: Yes. We say to Muslims generally: embark on battle in the way of God, and by God, God is in your State, and the unbelievers have rallied against it. Take a stance that will make God pleased with you. And whoever among you rally [to us], let the apostates and the Crusaders watch out for him. Let him kindle the war on their own ground, and in that way injure them and hurt them. Take care not to be drawn into helping the Crusaders against your Caliphate, not even with one word or half a word (*shaṭr kalima*), for that is extreme apostasy,<sup>52</sup> and there is no power and no strength except in God.

As for my message to the *mujāhidīn* – in the province and in the rest of the provinces of the Islamic State – I say to you: Show that you stand for truth. Show that you stand for truth, and think well of your Lord. Far be it from Him to forsake you while you are fighting His enemies and seeking to aid His Religion. “God will support those who support him, for God is full of Strength, exalted in Might.” [Quran 22:40] Take care not to weep or yield. Hold true to God and He will hold true to you. Hold firm to your religion and help each other in goodness and piety, and those who are uncertain do not despise you. I bid you farewell in God.

52 Despite al-Barnāwī's efforts to soften Boko Haram's stance against Muslim civilians, his words here suggest that not much has changed. Given Boko Haram's attitudes, it would be hard for a Muslim civilian to find a middle ground between perceived support for the state and supporting Boko Haram.