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Preliminary Report

NIGERIA: Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) Confirms Death of ISWAP leader Abu Musab Al-Barnawi

14 October 2021

Incident

On Thursday 14th October 2021, the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) of the Nigerian Armed Forces, General *Lucky Irabor*, confirmed earlier speculations that the leader of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), *Abu Musab Al-Barnawi* was dead.

The CDS during a brief press encounter said he could “authoritatively confirm” the death of ISWAP leader adding that “He is dead and remains dead,” without confirming a date of his demise. General Irabor, however, did not give any details of the circumstances leading to the death of Al-Barnawi. Meanwhile ISWAP itself has yet to comment on the purported death of its leader.



Abu Musab al-Barnawi (seated)

Analysis

The death of the leader of ISWAP, Abu Musab Al-Barnawi had been speculated in early September, without confirmation from either the Nigeria authorities or from within the organization itself. The revelation by General Irabor has certainly given credence to the reports even if he did not provide details or inform whether the body of the leader was recovered.

Born *Habib Yusuf*, Abu Musab Al-Barnawi, was believed to be the eldest son of Boko Haram founder *Mohammed Yusuf*. He was considered to be relatively moderate compared to his former ally turned nemesis *Abubakar Shekau* who preferred more extreme policies and strategies such as using children and women as suicide bombers as well as indiscriminate targeting of Muslims.

These differences will eventually lead to a splinter in 2016 after Boko Haram pledged allegiance to then ISIS leader Abubakar Al-Baghdadi and was christened ISWAP resulting in Shekau returning with his followers to maintaining the old name Boko Haram.

ISWAP had emerged as the strongest jihadist group in Nigeria and the greater Lake Chad Basin area following the death of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau in May this year.

As part of the strategy of Al-Barnawi to win the hearts and minds of local communities, ISWAP focused its attacks largely on the military and other security services in contrast to its rival Boko Haram that conducted indiscriminate attacks against civilians and security services.

Since the initial reporting of the death of Al-Barnawi, ISWAP continued to conduct high profile attacks, an indication that his death did not have any serious impact on the operations of the group, at least for now.

The two groups, Boko Haram and ISWAP, have come to define the terrorism landscape in the Lake Chad Basin (LBC) terrorizing communities in Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Chad.

Conclusion

The alleged death occurred amid the continuous armed confrontation between ISWAP and Boko Haram for the leadership on the ongoing insurgency in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria and neighbouring areas. This confrontation led to the death of Abubakar Shekau in May 2021, and has further intensified recently. Many ISWAP Commanders were reported having been killed by Boko Haram last month. The death of Al-Barnawi could negatively impact ISWAP at this crucial moment, and help Boko Haram regain recently lost positions, confidence and influence.

With the deaths of Shekau and Al-Barnawi, the two leaders that led to the split of the movement have disappeared. The emergence of new leaders will surely impact the future of both the groups in their strategic and tactical options.

While the reported death of the ISWAP leader has not shown any adverse impact on the group's operations, the countries in the Lake Chad Basin, particularly Nigeria could monitor the group's activities to exploit any schism that may arise out of contestations for leadership positions.

As the Nigerian authorities have witnessed the surrender of thousands of Boko Haram fighters since the death of Abubakar Shekau, such exploitation could also lead to the surrender of some ISWAP fighters who may not subscribe to the strategies of a new leader.

Such a development, coupled with addressing the underlying causal factors can lead to the taming of the terrorism situation in the region.