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ISWAP expansion in the Lake Chad Basin

Master's thesis

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Declaration

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In Prague on 31/07/2023

Camilla Biolcati

References

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Abstract

The research examines the birth and evolution of the Islamic State West Africa Province. Originating as a splinter group of Boko Haram, ISWAP was soon able to establish itself as a predominant force in the Lake Chad Basin region. This research aims to identify and analyse the factors that have enabled this rapid expansion and growth. By first reviewing the literature on the concepts of insurgency, salafism and salafi-jihadism, it aims to contextualise ISWAP as an example of a recurring pattern of violence in the Nigerian context, the country where it originated, due to a mix of social, economic, political, and religious factors. Subsequently, the origins of the group will be presented by understanding the reasons for its split with Boko Haram and through its links with the Islamic State, of which ISWAP is currently the main affiliate. Through an examination of the main characteristics, the emergence of ISWAP will be presented through the theoretical lens of the population-centric approach. ISWAP's insurgency represents a particular case in point for its ability to have adopted an approach aimed at gaining the support of the local population. This effort proved to be the most influential factor in its expansion and strength. ISWAP has developed a population-centric model, capable of providing economic opportunities and security for communities, thus imposing itself in the conflict scenario between rival salafi-jihadist groups and government forces in Lake Chad. To date, ISWAP thus represents the main threat in the region, being the group most capable of implementing the Islamic caliphate agenda.

Abstrak

Výzkum se zabývá zrodem a vývojem západoafrické provincie Islámského státu. Původ jako odštěpená skupina Boko Haram, se ISWAP brzy dokázala prosadit jako dominantní síla v oblasti povodí Čadského jezera. Cílem tohoto výzkumu je identifikovat a analyzovat faktory, které umožnily tuto rychlou expanzi a růst. Nejprve se zabývá přehledem literatury týkající se pojmů povstání, salafismu a salafistického džihadismu, je cílem kontextualizovat ISWAP jako příklad opakujícího se vzorce povstání násilí v nigerijském kontextu, tedy v zemi, kde vznikl, v důsledku kombinace sociálních, ekonomických, politických a náboženských faktorů. Následně bude zkoumán původ této skupiny, a to prostřednictvím pochopení důvodů jejího rozdělení s Boko Haram a prostřednictvím jejich vazeb na Islámský stát, jehož je ISWAP v současnosti hlavní pobočkou. Prostřednictvím zkoumání hlavních charakteristik, bude vznik ISWAP představen teoretickou optikou populačně orientovaného hnutí, které se zaměřuje na boj proti islámu. Přístupu. Povstání ISWAP představuje zvláštní případ, neboť si dokázalo osvojit tzv. přístup zaměřený na získání podpory místního obyvatelstva. Tato snaha se ukázala jako nejvlivnějším faktorem při jeho rozšiřování a posilování. ISWAP vyvinul model zaměřený na populaci, schopný poskytovat ekonomické příležitosti a bezpečnost komunitám, čímž se prosadil v oblasti životního prostředí v konfliktu mezi soupeřícími salafisticko-džihadistickými skupinami a vládními silami v oblasti Čadského jezera. Na adrese ISWAP tak k dnešnímu dni představuje hlavní hrozbu v oblasti povodí Čadského jezera, neboť je skupinou, která je nejčastěji schopná realizovat program islámského chalífátu

Keywords

ISWAP, Insurgency, Salafi-jihadism, Nigeria, Population-centric approach

Klíčová slova

ISWAP, povstání, salafistický džihádismus, Nigérie, přístup zaměřený na obyvatelstvo

Title

ISWAP expansion in the Lake Chad Basin

Název práce

Rozšíření ISWAP v povodí Čadského jezera

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Introduction

The Lake Chad Basin region has been plagued by various forms of insecurity for decades. One of the greatest security challenges has been the rise of the group popularly known as Boko Haram, which takes the meaning of 'Western education is forbidden', from the association of the Hausa language word *Boko*, which mutated from the English colonial word book, assumes the broader meaning of Western, and *Haram* meaning forbidden. It emerged in the early 2000s but only in 2009 under the official name of *Jama'atu Ahlul Sunnah li Da'awati wal Jihad* or 'People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad', it became violent, starting a bloody insurgency that still threatens the lives of the inhabitants of the area around Lake Chad and undermines state capacity and functionality. The research traces the origins of this movement, linking it to the recurring radicalism of an ideological current that has always been present in the region, Salafism. Tracing the origins of this current of Islam and its presence specifically in Nigeria, the state where the Boko Haram insurgency originated, one can also trace the external and internal factors and events that led towards the introduction of violence. In the form of salafi-jihad, the insurgency that emerges stems from a mix of social, political, economic and religious factors that have contributed to the radicalisation of segments of Nigerian society. Contextualised within the broader overview of the concept of insurgency, Boko Haram displays characteristics typical of salafi-jihadism type of insurgency. As the uprising evolves, however, several internal criticisms emerge concerning the methods and strategies of the group's leadership. Under Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram makes extensive use of brutal and indiscriminate violence, targeting all those he considers as infidels, even Muslim civilians. Disagreements over the concept of *takfir*,

which stands for 'excommunication', cause sections of the group to split off, first challenging the leadership from within and then finally breaking away. This faction will become the official affiliate of the Islamic State in West Africa, enjoying valuable initial material and ideological support from IS core. Although formed under the same common radical ideology as Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province became an insurgency better framed under the revolutionary warfare framework, in terms of methods and strategies. The ability of the more recently formed ISWAP faction to become the main threat in the region in a short period of time stems from a number of different factors. Among these, the adoption of an opposite approach to that of the rival group, oriented towards gaining the local population support, certainly has a strong impact. The events and dynamics analysed should be contextualised under the framework of the population-centric approach to insurgency, which has allowed ISWAP to consolidate its power and control. A softer understanding of *takfir* and a strategic view of the 'hearts and minds' approach ensured that ISWAP was able to take advantage of the vacuum created by Shekau's extreme brutality and the frequent abuses by government forces, positioning itself as the best alternative the population could rely on.

1.2 Research topic

The research seeks to answer the following research questions:

To what extent and by which means is the influence of the Islamic State West Africa Province expanding?

What are ISWAP's techniques and strategies to assert control over the territory?

The aim is to present a clear and comprehensive overview of the dynamics that gave rise to ISWAP and subsequently which factors enabled its expansion and growth. This is also illustrated through an insight into the links with the Islamic State and the influence it

exercised in the early years of ISWAP formation. The research aim is to present how expansion in territorial and non-territorial terms is due to a number of factors, but how the adoption of a population-centred approach played a key role. The research question, indeed, requires to investigate expansion in terms of influence rather than merely territorial extension because, as will be presented, ISWAP's approach has been more oriented towards the consolidation of greater control rather than a rapid spatial expansion.

The improvement in techniques and professionalism allowed the ISWAP faction to transition from an initial phase of insurgency, understood as 'strategic defensive', to exerting a greater, almost conventional, threat on government forces. In this way, ISWAP poses a more serious challenge to security and statehood, because its consolidation manifests itself in its ability to replace the government in the territories it controls and to provide basic services in place of the state, acting as a de facto ruler. Although this represents, in geographical terms, only part of Nigeria, which is mainly concentrated in the north of the country, it nevertheless demonstrates the resilience and capacity of the insurgency.

2. Methodology

2.1 Methodological approach

The methodology chosen for this research will be a qualitative study approach as the goal of the analysis will be to describe and understand the development of a phenomenon which is the insurgency led by the Islamic State West Africa Province. Therefore, a quantitative approach would not have served the purpose. Qualitative research lends itself well to the exploration of complex phenomena and in-depth understanding of the topic and will facilitate an in-depth analysis of the evolution of ISWAP and its main

characteristics in order to answer the research questions which investigate what the factors of ISWAP's expansion have been. Indeed, an interpretivist epistemologies type of research is required to seeks to understand this phenomenon in all its facets. Qualitative research will explore the experiences, perspectives and behaviour of the actors involved in the topic under investigation and also examine the contextual factors that may have influenced the evolution of ISWAP. Contextual understanding has been fundamental to present the evolution of the phenomenon, thus the emergence of salafi-jihadism in the Nigerian context and ability of ISWAP to impose itself as the predominant group in the area. The choice for this research of the intrinsic case study is particularly suited to its objectives. By presenting ISWAP as the only group in West Africa to have succeeded in grasping the relevance of a population-centric approach to insurgency and making it its strong point in competing with rival group Boko Haram and government forces, the intrinsic case study presents a better fit for analysing and understanding this phenomenon. Therefore, the choice of a single case study is justified in the uniqueness of the phenomenon and the exclusive objective of understanding its precise characteristics. As the choice of the intrinsic case study is particularly suited to the objectives of this research, it will therefore focuses on those elements that make the case unique, justifying the choice. Furthermore, analysing it in all its facets allows us to show its complexity and the various factors that play a role on it. n this way, the emphasis of the research is on the elements that make the case study unique, and thus justify the intrinsic case study

2.2 Data and Data collection

The research relies mostly on consulting secondary data. For the most part, the research relies on consulting secondary data. The categories of resources used are mainly official reports from international agencies or organisations, analyses and reports produced by research institutes, and analyses and books produced by academics and databases of

groups monitoring political violence events. Books and academic articles by experts on the jihadist threat in the Lake Chad Basin, insurgency, violent extremism and Salafi-jihadism were consulted. In addition, academic research on Boko Haram, which presents an extensive literature, was consulted and analysed. Online newspapers, publications of international organisations and governmental institutions, as well as the consultation of databases of monitoring groups specialised in tracking the evolving dynamics of violent extremism in the region were mostly used for the analysis of ISWAP.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

The literature review will aim to present the relevant research present regarding the emergence linked to ISWAP, as a splinter faction of Boko Haram this will mainly focus on studies done on the group that originated it. To answer the research questions it is therefore necessary to first have an overview of what is meant by insurgency, how academics have defined it and divided it into different types. Therefore, after reviewing the literature regarding the strategy of insurgency, two different types of insurgencies, the Salafi-jihadist insurgency and the revolutionary warfare insurgency, will be presented in relation to the characteristics of ISWAP. In fact, the ISWAP insurgency as an Islamic insurgency is traditionally pigeon-holed into the jihadist type of insurgency and we will see how this is defined. But another current also attributes to ISWAP the characteristics of revolutionary warfare in terms of strategies and tactics. Fundamental in this is to approach the focus of the research, which is to identify how and through which techniques and strategies the ISWAP places its control over territory.

3.2 Overview of the concept of insurgency

In the modern era, the emergence of violent non-state actors represents a significant challenge to statehood, particularly in terms of maintaining the fundamental

characteristics of what is considered the modern state: sovereign authority, control of territory and monopoly of the use of force. Violent non-state actors are defined as all those entities that are not part of the state and challenge its prerogatives through the use of force¹. For the purposes of this research, the actors we will discuss fall into the category of insurgents. The phenomenon of insurgency has existed since people used violence to resist states and empires, increasing in intensity when the likelihood of a conventional war between great powers became unlikely, during the Cold War². The study of insurgency has its origins in the guerrilla and small wars of the 19th century and beyond; until the end of the Cold War, this concept was limited to separatist movements and those of Marxist origin. However, with the increase in insurrectionary movements and the threats posed to the nation-state in the post-Cold War era, it became necessary to create typologies and to better study the set of factors and characteristics of the insurrectionary phenomenon.

In defining insurgency, however, the literature has often found it difficult to distinguish terrorists from insurgents. Giving a precise definition of the concept of terrorism and the concept of insurgency is not an easy task, especially since these concepts sometimes overlap or the lines of distinction blur. The Islamic State West Africa Province has certainly been defined as both an insurgent group and a terrorist group, and the reason stems precisely from this complication. Precisely, Byman states that it is reasonable to affirm that not all terrorists are insurgent groups, while the opposite is almost always true, as insurgents use

¹ Yeşiltaş, Murat, and Tuncay Kardaş. "Introduction: The Phenomenon of Non-state Armed Actors and Patterns of Violent Geopolitics in the Middle East." In: Yeşiltaş, Murat, and Tuncay Kardaş (eds.). *Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East: Geopolitics, Ideology, and Strategy*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer (2018): 3–20.

² Steven Metz. 11 Jan 2012, Rethinking Insurgency from: The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Routledge Accessed on: 20 Jul 2023 <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203132609.ch>

terrorism as a strategy³. To distinguish between these two phenomena, Kiras defines insurgency by what it is not rather than what it is⁴. Thus, an insurgent movement, according to Kiras, is not a conventional conflict between two symmetrical regular armies, but rather a clash between the forces of a state and those of a non-state entity that, possessing lesser capabilities and resources, clash asymmetrically with the government in what is called irregular warfare. The latter refers to those asymmetrical clashes that differ from regular war only in their tactical character. The insurgency can be understood in this sense as a technique or mode of irregular warfare according to Grey⁵. Irregular tactics are used within the insurgency as a means to overcome inferiority to the regular army. The distinction with terrorism lies here, as having in common the use of violence, insurgency differs in the purpose and scope of violence through the implementation of terrorist tactics. For some scholars, such as Ariel Merari in fact, terrorism is best understood as a technique within the insurgency strategy, which combined with guerrilla tactics led the insurgency to a protracted war aimed at overthrowing the government⁶. Indeed, according to Grey's definition, an insurgency is a protracted struggle systematically waged to achieve a specific goal that ultimately leads to the overthrow of the existing order. To give another widely recognized definition, NATO members states, as well as the US Department of Defence agreed on this: *'an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed*

³ Byman, Daniel. "Terrorism, Insurgency, and Proto-Insurgency." In *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies: RAND Counterinsurgency Study Paper 3*, 1st ed., 3–6. RAND Corporation, 2007. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/op178osd.8>.

⁴ Kiras, James D. "Irregular Warfare: Terrorism and Insurgency." *Strategy in the Contemporary World: An Introduction to Strategic Studies*. Ed. John Baylis et al. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 186–207.

⁵ Gray, Colin S. *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History*. Abingdon, New York: Routledge (2007): pp. 245–252.

⁶ Merari, Ariel. "Terrorism as a Strategy of Insurgency." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 5.4 (1993): 213–251.

*conflict*⁷. Another basic and widespread definition of insurgency can be found in the Field Manual (FM) 3-24 Insurgency and Counterinsurgency recognizing subversion and violence as the required elements to characterize an insurgency, which is defined as *the organised use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region. Insurgency can also refer to the group itself*⁸. More extensive is also the definition that emerged by the collaboration of the US Air Force and the Army resulting in the AF Pamphlet 3-20 which states the following: "*organised, armed political struggle whose goal may be the seizure of power through revolutionary takeover and replacement of the existing government. In some cases, however, an insurgency's goals may be more limited. For example, the insurgency may intend to break away from government control and establish an autonomous state within traditional ethnic or religious territorial bounds. The insurgency may also only intend to extract limited political concessions unattainable through less violent means*"⁹. What emerged by this analysis of different definitions is the widespread agreement on the political purpose of the insurgency, whether it manifests itself in undermining an imposed order or completing overthrowing it. In order to do so, George Michael, notes that one of the most important goals of insurgency is to survive¹⁰. In surviving, the insurgency is defined as a protracted struggle, which does not aim for an overwhelming victory, but to survive and keep the struggle alive with the aim of forcing a political solution, a compromise. The Australian doctrine definition add specification regarding the methods employed and stating that insurgency

⁷ NATO. 2011. "ALLIED JOINT DOCTRINE for COUNTERINSURGENCY (COIN)." *AJP-3.4.4*, February 2011.

<https://info.publicintelligence.net/NATO-Counterinsurgency.pdf>.

⁸ US Army (2006) Field Manual 3–24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3–33.5, Counterinsurgency, December

⁹ Air Force Pamphlet 3-20: Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict, HQ, Departments of the Army and Air Force, Washington, D. C., December 5, 1990, p. 30.

¹⁰ George, Michael . 2014. "The New Insurgents a Select Review of Recent Literature on Terrorism and Insurgency, 2014." Air University (AU). March 3, 2014.

<https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CSDS/Display/Article/1612726/the-new-insurgents-a-select-review-of-recent-literature-on-terrorism-and-insurg/>.

is defined as an ‘*organised, violent and politically motivated activity conducted by non-state actors and sustained over a protracted period that typically utilises a number of methods, such as subversion, guerrilla warfare and terrorism, in an attempt to achieve change within a state*’¹¹. It should be derived that a second element that finds a high level of agreement is the fact that the insurgency is the struggle of the weak, against a numerically, militarily, resource superior force, which therefore makes it necessary for the insurgents to use the means at their disposal in a way to alter the imbalance. This is why the insurgency uses asymmetric tactics in the form of guerrilla warfare, acts of terrorism, psychological warfare campaigns etc. Nevertheless, this may be an initial phase to gain an advantage, but later on, the onset may also make use of conventional and regular tactics, so, according to Mao's theory, tactical flexibility and adaptability are necessary to attain success. Indeed, the insurgency usually follows a cycle as described by Metz, in which it initially introduces guerrilla techniques out of strategic necessity and resorts to the use of terrorist actions in order to survive, recognized as the ‘overwhelming priority’¹². But then, by demonstrating operational and tactical adaptability, aims to modify its capabilities by operating according to conventional tactics, as the ultimate goal for the insurgency, according to Grey is to become the regular force¹³.

3.3 Different typologies of insurgency

¹¹ Australian Army. 2008. “Special Edition: Counterinsurgency.” *Australian Army Journal* V (2).

¹² Metz, Steven, and Raymond Millen. 2004. “Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century: Reconceptualizing Threat and Response.” *Monographs, Collaborative Studies, & IRPs*, November. <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/761/>.

¹³ Gray, Colin S. “*War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History*.”.

Having defined what are the general traits and aims of an insurgency, however, the heterogeneity of the phenomenon has caused scholars to draw different lines to subdivide the insurgency according to types of struggles as insurgents are moved by a different set of reasons. Since these are numerous and vary according to the author who defined them, only a few will be drawn and then we will define those that most apply to the insurgency conducted by ISWAP in the Lake Chad Basin. These types of insurgencies can be, according to those listed by Kiras, revolutionary, partisan, guerrilla, liberation, or civil war. Through a very comprehensive report by Robert J-Bunker published by the Strategic Studies Institute, it is possible to identify several theorisations of the type of insurgency¹⁴. For the purposes of this research, only a few will be mentioned. What he outlines among the contemporary forms of insurgency, the radical Islamist is a military-political threat that he derives from the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. It comes in two variants, the Shia-based and the Sunni-based, and originates as he acknowledges from the fact that Islam has never undergone a historical reformation introducing secular political thought and the separation of church and state, as in fact recalled in the origins of Boko Haram in its desire to purify a corrupt state and therefore considered unjust mainly because of its failure to pursue and enforce God's law. This form of insurgency is also recognised and theorised by other authors, including Metz which is reactionary-traditionalist model and spiritual type, the latter being as a model for the violent new religious movements conceptualized by Lauder and the traditional insurgency by O'Neill. Metz traces a line of descent of the spiritual insurgency directly from the traditional revolutionary insurgency (the Marxist movements to make an example, but not only), speaking of this as an insurgency triggered by the need to search for meaning, in the sense of liberation from

¹⁴ Bunker, Robert J. "OLD AND NEW INSURGENCY FORMS." Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11556>.

the regime one rejects¹⁵. For the insurgent, therefore, it is a struggle for power in search of personal meaning, which is linked to the need for political participation in order to overcome a situation of discontent and injustice. Insurgents are those who punish for the injustice and suffering imposed by a regime they do not recognise. This typology is thus easily linked to the criticism of the importation of Western influence, which the insurgents use to recall an authentic national past. Metz identifies Islamic fundamentalism as an example of this type of insurgency, which can easily be related to the ISWAP insurgency as an Islamic-minded group that rejects Western culture and criticises the corruption of their own country that has moved away from the purity of Islam. On this basis, Launder attempts to expand on what was conceptualised by Metz by showing that today's spiritual movements are *new violent religious movements*, motivated by a religiously-inspired worldwide which seek to pursue a radical social transformation through the use of violence religiously justified. Ibrahimi, similarly to Metz theory of spiritual insurgency, in his paper investigating the core causes leading to the emergence of al-Qaeda, presents an 'individual quest for significance' as an important factor, as well as Salafi-jihadism as group ideology, in the rise of the group¹⁶. Kilcullen's view on global insurgency and globalised Islamism are presented in the Countering global insurgency's research, which aims to recognise *jihad* as an insurgency, specifically a global insurgency. He makes this clarification in distinguishing a traditional insurgency from a jihadist insurgency, stating that: 'whereas traditional insurgencies sought to overthrow established governments or social orders in one state or district, this insurgency seeks to transform the entire Islamic world and remake its relationship with the rest of the globe'¹⁷. Therefore, Kilcullen sees the grievances and methods of the jihad as similar to those of a traditional insurgency,

¹⁵ Metz, Steven. "THE FUTURE OF INSURGENCY." Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 1993. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11412>.

¹⁶ S. Ibrahimi. "Theory of the rise of al-Qaeda." *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 10 (2018): 138 - 157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2017.1320567>.

¹⁷ Kilcullen, David J.. "Countering global insurgency." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28 (2005): 597 - 617.

whit however a wider scope of not just re-establish an ancient example of Caliphate, but to spread Islam to the broader human society. The Islamic State West Africa Province may seem obvious to be part of the macro group of Salafist-jihadist insurgency, due to the rejection of Western ideas and influence, the criticism towards the corrupt and infidel regime and the aspiration to impose Sharia law on Muslim land.

3.4 Salafi ideology, the concept of Jihad and Salafi-Jihad Insurgency

Salafism is an ideological current within Sunni Islam known for its puritanical approach. Its adherents advocate strict adherence to the original model of Prophet Muhammad, aspiring to return society and politics to Islam's roots, rejecting any religious innovation that deviates from the prophet's teachings. It's important to note that Salafism, as an ideology, does not inherently imply violence or jihad. Jihadism is an interpretation of Salafism that adopts military and violent connotations. The Salafist movement is centred around a common religious creed, emphasizing the concept of tawhid, the oneness and supremacy of God, rejecting human reasoning and desires. This creed dictates that the Quran and Sunna should be followed faithfully, governing all aspects of human life, beliefs, and behavior. Salafism as a current stands out from the others and considers itself supreme and pure because Salafists are those who have learnt directly from God's messenger, the prophet Muhammad. The holy scriptures must therefore be followed without the possibility of human logical-rational interpretation, in order to remain as faithful as possible to the purity of the model of the prophet Mohammed. This is the basis of the Salafists' challenge to the innovations produced by culture, education or globalisation for example, which risk undermining the true essence of Islam. Applying the centuries-old model of the prophet in the contemporary world, however, is difficult without resorting to any kind of interpretation. Applying the centuries-old model of the prophet to the contemporary world can be challenging without interpretations.

Consequently, Salafism experiences internal divisions based more on strategic differences than ideological ones. Three factions emerge within Salafism: purists, politics, and jihadis. Quintan Wiktorowicz gave a clear explanation of the Salafi movement and its factions¹⁸. He points out that they all share a common creed, or *aqida*, which outlines the basic dogma to understand religious principles. However, they differ in methods, *manhaj*, elaborating different solutions and approaches to the challenges of the contemporary world. The purist faction focuses on non-violent methods of education and propagation of religious beliefs, which they consider the best method for implementing the creed, thus avoiding rebellion and political opposition. In fact, they do not see themselves as a political movement and refuse to see Salafism as a movement charge of political connotations. Indeed, the purist scholars strongly criticise both the politics and the jihadis, because of their focus on politics, seen as a threat to the purity of Islam. They recognise *jihad* as it was understood during the Meccan period when it was referred to peaceful struggle meant to spread and profess Islam. The Politics, on the other hand, as the name suggests, focus their application of the Salafist creed on the political arena. They criticise the old stream of scholars, hence the purists, and political regimes that they consider unjust or unable to grasp the problems and threats of the contemporary world. For this reason, they became a movement to challenge the interpretation of current political problems, considering themselves more knowledgeable and skilled in politics. Although they considered it essential to protect the purity of Islam, they considered it equally important to address political issues and thus be more actively involved in political life. This faction is also associated with the arrival in the 60s of the Muslim Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia, which brought a more politically oriented agenda in the country where purists were predominant. The Muslim Brotherhood is recognized to have

¹⁸ Wiktorowicz, Quintan. 2006. "Anatomy of the Salafi movement." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29.3 (2006): 207-239.

strongly influenced the emergence of the global Salafi jihad movement. They, taking the form of a political party, brought political thought inside the Salafi ideology and later on posed the bases for the call for armed struggle¹⁹. This materialised in the third current described by Wiktorowicz, the jihadists, who, sharing with the politicians the criticism toward the purists, elevated this political opposition by combining it with the use of violence²⁰. The jihadists thus represent the more military position, which favours the use of violence to bring about changes to the political order that they consider corrupt and non-legitimate, or non-Islamic, simply because it does not adhere to Salafism. Their goal is, therefore, the construction of an Islamic state in the form of a caliphate under *sharia*, or God's law. To do this, they extend the meaning of *jihad* to an interpretation of 'total war', or holy war, carrying out violence against political leaders, government forces and foreign invaders as well as whoever is considered as an infidel. This extension of the concept of *jihad* moves away from its traditional form of a purely defensive struggle. Although the beginnings of Salafi-jihadism should not be directly derived from the Muslim Brotherhood, as even within it there was disagreement over the use or non-use of violence, the ideological influence was nonetheless of great impetus. Historians trace what we now understand as Salafism to that intellectual body of thought in the 20th century that emerged from the intersection of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and other Islamic currents. Most of the academy traces the theoretical foundation of Salafism-Jihadism back to Islamic theologians of the Middle Ages, the most cited of whom is Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328). The ideology then regained momentum and popularity in the 1950s thanks to the teachings of Sayyid Qutb, who has also been influenced by Ibn Taymiyya, an intellectual figure within the Muslim Brotherhood, to whom much of the influence of what has become according to Shultz the global Salafi Jihad movement is

¹⁹ Shultz, Richard H. 2008. "Global Insurgency Strategy and the Salafi Jihad Movement."

²⁰ Wiktorowicz, Quintan. 2006. "Anatomy of the Salafi movement."

traced. In fact, his works are recognized as 'doctrinal treaties for Salafi Jihadism' which he published in the 60s²¹. The critics moved by Qutb in his book *Maalim fi-l-tar* was that post-colonial regimes were illegitimate because they were un-Islamic, calling, therefore, Muslims who lived there to reject the political authority and overthrow it.

While the meaning of jihadis (faction) within the Salafist movement is now clearer, it is nevertheless crucial to remember that there is a consistent difference between jihadism and *jihad*, which even purists talk about. The term *Jihad*, in fact, means 'effort', which is understood as the striving made by the believers in the name of God, and can refer to all kinds of religiously inspired efforts, spiritual, personal, political, or military. *Jihad* is generally reflected in three categories. One is the individual effort, *Jihad-e-Akbar*, thus against temptations, vices, towards a life of moral discipline under God's commands that every Muslims must face in the course of their life. The second, *Jihad-e-Kabir*, means the spreading of the Qur'anic message, hence the word of God, which is also obligatory for every Muslim. And finally, *Jihad-e-Asghar* is understood precisely as struggle, in defensive terms, hence of a struggle that every Muslim must undertake to free themselves from oppression²². Sayyid Qutb, among the Islamic theologians most recognised for empowering salafi-jihadism in the 20th century, influenced various groups in their goal of global jihad. Both al-Qaeda and ISIS often cite this intellectual to oppose governments not based on God's law. The Qur'anic verse referred to is 5:48: 'Whoever does not rule according to what God has sent down, is an unbeliever', which has allowed the meaning of *Jihad* to be extended to 'holy war', extending the targeting of infidels, be they Muslims

²¹ Shultz, Richard H. "Global Insurgency Strategy and the Salafi Jihad Movement."

²² admin. 2023. "What Is Jihad according to Islam." *Ilm Ki Bat*. May 19, 2023.
<https://ilmkibat.com/what-is-jihad/>.

or Westerners. Obviously, it goes beyond the purposes of this research to go into more detail with respect to the specific conditions laid down in the Koran for the application of such *jihad* and thus also the use of violence. This is not the purpose but is only functional to draw general lines of how jihadism was formed based on an interpretation of what is a current of the Salafi movement inside a narrow vision of Sunni Islamic understanding.

According to Moghaddam, the first usage of the term Jihadism dates back to the 90s, referring to a modern revolutionary political ideology. The medieval teachings of Ibn Taymiyya changed the interpretation of *jihad* from a defensive to an offensive effort, with the aim of opposing anyone who rejects Islam and thus providing a justification for insurgent movements aimed at the removal of governments led by non-Muslim rulers. The Taymiyya principles labelled the doctrine of Salafist-jihadists, which can be summarised by Moghaddam's analysis in which he relates the four main functions of an ideology to Salafi-jihadism. First, the purpose is to aware Muslims that their religion has been on the wane, and that therefore those responsible for such decadence must be blamed (Jihadis Vs. Purists). The aim then is to create an identity and a specific programme of action that within the jihadist groups will manifest military terms. salafi-jihadism is therefore a religious ideology because it uses terminologies and symbols and values related to the religion of Islam. Moghaddam shows us how salafi-jihadism invokes religion in three ways: through the use of specific terminology to first identify itself and then its members and enemies, apostrophized as Crusaders, apostates, infidels etc. Their mission and strategy are also religious in nature, using the concept of *jihad* to carry out a military campaign justified through the scriptures of the Qur'an. Other research identifies, as that of Ibrahim, jihadism as a political ideology, in the sense that it gives an interpretation of social and political issues in Muslim societies. The difference between

Salafism, which is a religious interpretation of Sunni Islam, and jihadism, which gives a political interpretation of religious doctrine, must therefore be emphasised once again.²³

The events to which the proliferation of the Jihadist insurgency has been traced are diverse, some citing the Algerian war, some the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, certainly the events of 9/11 and the subsequent invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. A precise and unique definition of jihadi insurgency has not been formulated, the most cited one is the one offered by Peter Nasser which states that Salafi-jihadism is ‘the ideology of al-Qaida and likeminded movements, mixing Wahhabi-inspired Sunni fundamentalism (Salafism) with a revolutionary program of overthrowing unjust and un-Islamic regimes in the Muslim world, as well as irredentism aiming at expelling non-Muslim military presence and influences from Muslim lands’²⁴. What unites different experiences of *jihadism*, according to Ibrahim, are three key concepts, that of ‘*Al-wala’ wal bara’*’, translated ‘loyalty and disavowal’, the concept of ‘*Al-Hakimiyyah*’, that is, sovereignty and finally that of ‘*Takfir*’ or ex-communication²⁵. The latter especially in relation to what distinguishes ISWAP within salafi-jihadism but with respect to the Boko Haram faction above all is especially relevant. Takfir defines who is a Muslim and who is an infidel and also defines the circumstances under which a Muslim can be excommunicated While traditionally, the infidels and thus those to whom jihad should be directed were the representatives of the West, within salafi-jihadism this split is created between those who extend the interpretation of takfir and thus extend the target to Muslims considered

²³Ibrahim, Ibrahim Yahaya. “The Wave of Jihadist Insurgency in West Africa: Global Ideology, Local Context, Individual Motivations.”

²⁴ Nasser, Petter. 2013. “Abū Qatāda and Palestine.” *Welt Des Islams* 53 (3-4): 416–48.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-5334p0005>.

²⁵Ibrahim, Ibrahim Yahaya. “The Wave of Jihadist Insurgency in West Africa: Global Ideology, Local Context, Individual Motivations.”

apostates by giving different interpretations to a series of situations, such as simply collaborating with the West, living within a territory under government control, or not joining the jihadist movement. Not only the distinction between the targeting of Muslims and non-Muslims, but also the targeting of women and children, whether through their use as suicide bombers has divided the mainstream. And this is what we see especially in the context of ISWAP's exit from Boko Haram. The latter, under Shekau's leadership, extensively conducted these types of attacks and targeting of Muslims, increasingly alienating the population, and alienating them from hypothetical support for the insurgency.

To sum up it can be said that Salafism represent a current of Sunni Islamic which refers to itself as the most true and authentic Islam. Jihadism is the concept that derived from *jihad* as an obligation upon all Muslim to protect the community, is rather in this interpretation an individual duty against the Muslims leaders as well that are ruling illegitimately and therefore need to be overthrown, if necessary, with violence. salafi-jihadism in this sense should be interpreted as an approach to jihadism with a strict adherence to Salafism, which became the basis to their armed jihad and their source of legitimization of the use of force against whoever is deemed apostates.²⁶

3.5 Literature about salafi-jihadism in Nigeria

The above concepts see their application in the case study of Boko Haram, a group traditionally recognised as a Salafi-jihadism type of insurgency. There are two elements to be observed in this analysis, the presence and spread of Salafism in Nigeria and the experiences of jihadism. Compared to the previously illustrated definitions of salafi-

²⁶ Williams, Stephanie T. 2016. "Islamism, Salafism, and Jihadism: A Primer." Brookings. July 2016.

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/islamism-salafism-and-jihadism-a-primer/>.

jihadism, the experience in West Africa and especially of the group examined does not represent completely what Kilcullen has called globalised Islamism. Although Boko Haram has had links first with al-Qaeda and then with the Islamic State, its aims and objectives remain limited to a local level. Nigeria is the country most often cited as being most affected, but the research also includes the expansion and general threat posed by the insurgency in the wider Lake Chad area. This expansion, however, remains limited to a local context, regional if you like, but does not aim to hit targets outside the African context. It is understood that even if ISWAP comes to have the capabilities, excluding for lack of sufficient information that it now has them, it does not seem to be in the group's interests to extend its fight outside the already affected area. During a Webinar organized by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Ini-Dele Adedeji and Sofia Keller presented ISWAP tendency to be a glocal one, intending precisely the transnational character of ISWAP (active in several states around Lake Chad), but not transregional because it does not show the capabilities to extend beyond it²⁷. And with regard to its globalist approach, ISWAP does not expand and create too many links and connections with other organisations outside its interests, showing a more local interest. This distinguishes ISWAP and Boko Haram from those definitions of salafi-jihadism that see it as the insurgents' need to export *jihad* throughout Muslim land. The fact that ISWAP, like its originating group, focused more on local internal affairs is the result of a much more complex set of factors that gave rise to jihadism. On the contrary, Freedom Onuoha relates Boko Haram to the definition of salafi-jihadi groups proposed by Denoeux & Carter who define these groups as 'motivated by a mix of religious and political objectives, who interpreted *jihad* as a holy

²⁷ Dele-Adedeji, Ini, and Sofia Keller. 2023. "Linkages of Terrorist Groups in West Africa with Terrorist Networks in Other African Regions ." Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

war instrumental to a return to the original message of Islam'²⁸. They also add that their approach to jihad as a global struggle distinguishes them from radical Islamists. Referring to their definition again, the focus is on fighting the West in general and the United States in particular. They define them as transnational movements, disseminators of an ideology hostile to modernity and the peaceful coexistence of different cultures and religions. Several aspects of this definition are interesting, firstly we do not see in Boko Haram this strong hostility towards e.g., the United States, the attacks have mainly been aimed at the military of the regional government forces. Furthermore, it is crucial to address the heterogeneity of the context in which Boko Haram develops, as Nigeria is a country with much diversity. In contrast to this framing of Boko Haram in the spectrum of a religious movement, particularly salafi-jihadism, several authors propose a different interpretation, arguing that it is better to consider it in the tradition of radical extremist movements. Delia Deckard, Barkindo, and Jacobson (2015), consider Boko Haram in the radical tradition across the ideological spectrum²⁹. Especially they conclude that Boko Haram is an Islamic group with a strong Islamist ideology which however is not the main motivation for the widespread support they received, rather the support came from more social and economic factors which have nothing to do with religion³⁰. Similarly, Loimeier in his research also proposes a framing of Boko Haram within Nigerian Radical Islam which however is the result of social and political dynamics³¹. In this case, Loimeier emphasises

²⁸Serrano, Rafael, and Zacharias Pieri. 2021. "By the Numbers: The Nigerian State's Efforts to Counter Boko Haram." Edited by Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos. OpenEdition Books. Ibadan: IFRA-Nigeria. July 22, 2021. <http://books.openedition.org/ifra/1800>.

²⁹Delia Deckard, Natalie, Atta Barkindo, and David Jacobson. 2015. "Religiosity and Rebellion in Nigeria: Considering Boko Haram in the Radical Tradition." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38 (7): 510–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2015.1022443>.

³⁰Delia Deckard, Natalie, Atta Barkindo, and David Jacobson. "Religiosity and Rebellion in Nigeria: Considering Boko Haram in the Radical Tradition."

³¹Loimeier, Roman. 2012. "Boko Haram: The Development of a Militant Religious Movement in Nigeria." *Africa Spectrum* 47 (2-3): 137–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000203971204702-308>.

how theological arguments acquire a fundamental importance for the self-definition of a new religious movement. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos gave his perspective on Boko Haram stating he sees it as ‘an indigenous uprising with a religious ideology, a political meaning and some social support locally’, and as a sect because of their deviances from mainstream Islam and strong intolerance reflected in their targeting.³² Metfess likewise presents Boko Haram's transition from a dissident religious community to a transnational insurgency as the result not so that of a call for religious revival but more as the result of a call for better governance³³. The majority of the literature considers the Boko Haram uprising as a recurring pattern of violence in Nigeria, given its extreme social heterogeneity and the importance, as well as the divisiveness, of the religious aspect. This is why it is crucial to mention the Nigerian context that facilitated the transition from Salafism to jihadism.

3.6 Literature about past experiences of insurgency in Nigeria

Boko Haram's call to *jihad* was not the first time such an event occurred in the region. This recurrence has often been interpreted in the framework of a deeper social unease, rather than a mission to spread Islam to the whole country beyond its borders. To begin with, the historical and social context of Nigeria must be contextualised. A country that fell under British colonisation in 1914, by the time it gained independence in 1960, it was divided into three major ethnic divisions, resulting in: the Yoruba in the west, Hausa-Fulani in the north and Igbo in the east³⁴. The most general macro division of the country is between the Muslim-dominated north, which accounts for around 50% of the country,

³²DePérouse. 2015. *Boko Haram : Islamism, Politics, Security, & the State in Nigeria*. Hollywood, Ca: Tsehai.

³³ Matfess, Hilary. 2017. “Boko Haram: History and Context.” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, October. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.119>.

³⁴ Mohammed, Kyari. 2014. “The Message and Methods of Boko Haram.” In *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, 9–32. French Institute for Research in Africa. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ifra.1753>.

and the Christian-dominated south, 40%. Despite this, there are vast minority communities in both areas that do not always manage to coexist peacefully, as well as a diversity of some 350 other ethnic minorities³⁵. This scenario simplistically presents the country's great diversity, which stems largely from the colonial experience and influence. Different regional and political identities have long and still widened the gap between one ethnic group and another, increasing discontent and resentment obviously reflected in greater progress in the south of the country influenced by Western politics, economy, culture and education. The political-religious divisions together with other socio-economic factors contributed to a climate of frustration and disillusionment that increasingly led to an orientation towards identity-based and divisive politics. But it was not only poverty and lack of resources that raised violence and conflict under the current of Islamic fundamentalism, as the roots of *jihad* in Nigeria go back much further. In fact, according to Iyekepolo, the traces of the Boko Haram insurgency can be traced back to two events in the past which, when analysed with the Nigerian context as a whole, provide a more sympathetic explanation of the evolution of the insurgency³⁶. Several academics trace the ideologization of Islam back to Shehu Uthman Dan Fodio call to *jihad* in northern Nigeria, as the first one to establish an Islamic tradition. The insurgency, so it is referred to, of Don Fodio is considered among the precedents of that of Boko Haram. Kassim's research describes this experience as a causal factor for the sensitivity in northern Nigeria to the radical religious philosophies that developed later³⁷. But even this example, according to Iyekepolo research, must be contextualised in the economic and

³⁵ Brinkel, Theo, and Soumia Ait-Hida. 2012. "BOKO HARAM and JIHAD in NIGERIA." *Scientia Militaria - South African Journal of Military Studies* 40 (2). <https://doi.org/10.5787/40-2-994>.

³⁶ Iyekepolo, Wisdom Oghosa. 2016. "Boko Haram: Understanding the Context." *Third World Quarterly* 37 (12): 2211-28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2016.1177453>.

³⁷ Kassim, Abdulbasit. 2015. "Defining and Understanding the Religious Philosophy Ofjihādī-Salafism and the Ideology of Boko Haram." *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 16 (2-3): 173–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2015.1074896>.

social context of the country at that time³⁸. The author speaks about economic, ideological, and political factors in comparing the Boko Haram insurgency with that of Don Fodio and a subsequent event called the Maitatsine crisis of 1980, as an example of a recurrence of the insurgency under the name of Islam that however reflects a social, economic, and above all a political opportunity. The brief analysis of these two events helps to understand the background of *jihad* in Nigeria, a phenomenon that did not begin with Boko Haram but which replicates dynamics of economic intolerance, framed under a religious ideological light, to which is added a political opportunity that allows it to evolve into insurgency. Don Fodio, a religious teacher from the city of Gobir, accused the political class of his time of indiscriminate injustice and corruption, representing them as the cause of the economic hardship of the citizens. He declared *jihad* against the government of Husa land, accused of unfair tax regimes, indiscriminate revocation of land ownership and corruption. What the author discusses is that the factor of economic hardship alone could not have led to people's participation in the *jihad*, but rather its interaction with ideological and political factors. Indeed, frustration and dissatisfaction among the population due to social and economic crisis, led religious identity to play a role in fuelling the *jihad* and the actual beginning of violence. According to Kassim, Don Fodio's movement was at first an intellectual one; he taught the population basic Islamic beliefs, addressing social justice issues as well³⁹. The moment of violent confrontation resulted from a recurrent persecution of his followers by the Hausa kings. His *jihad* against the Hausa rulers is considered a revolution in the sense that rebellion against rulers who consider themselves Muslim and believe in the Islamic faith is not permitted in Sunni

³⁸Iyekekepolo, "Boko Haram: Understanding the Context."

³⁹ Kassim, Abdulbasit. "Defining and Understanding the Religious Philosophy Of *jihādī*-Salafism and the Ideology of Boko Haram."

Islam political theory. Don Fodio, therefore, proposes, through his scriptures and invocations, theological justifications for the *Jihad* declaration of 1804. Don Fodio founded a tradition of Islamic revivalism, generally referred to as *tajdid* in northern Nigeria. Iyekekpolo argue that analysts refer to the philosophy of *tajdid* as the guide of Don Fodio's insurgency⁴⁰. His attempt to establish the supremacy of *Qur'an* and to purify northern-Nigeria from un-Islamic elements resulted in the declaration of the Sokoto caliphate. Don Fodio's religious empire also included parts of present-day Niger and north Cameroon, imposing Islam on a large part of West Africa, corresponding to the now more threatened area. The Empire has kept its momentum for about a hundred years, until the military coup of 1966, the powers and autonomy of the emirs were greatly restricted⁴¹.

The advent of British colonialism probably had a strong impact on a society already strongly influenced by Islamic education. The importation of a new Western education model led to strong clashes between social classes and an exacerbation of the differences between them. In the same way as Don Fodio's *jihad*, the Maitatsine uprising in the post-colonial context sought to cleanse parts of northern Nigeria from Western influence by appealing to a religious ideology but based on a strong political and social critique of the society of the time. The Maitatsine movement like that of Don Fodio is widely recognised as a precursor to the Boko Haram insurgency. Since 1920s, a preacher by the name of Mohammed Marwa, originally from Cameroon, gave rise to a very radical rejection of modernity and innovation, which lashed out against Western culture and everything outside the Qur'anic doctrine⁴². Moreover, the military rule in place since 1966, in the 80s become really oppressive⁴³. The popularity of the so-called Matatsine doctrine gave rise

⁴⁰ Iyekekpolo, "Boko Haram: Understanding the Context."

⁴¹ HICKEY, RAYMOND. 1984. "THE 1982 MAITATSINE UPRISINGS in NIGERIA: A NOTE." *African Affairs* 83 (331): 251–56. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a097608>.

⁴² Loimeier, Roman. "Boko Haram: The Development of a Militant Religious Movement in Nigeria."

⁴³ Brinkel, Theo, and Soumia Ait-Hida. 2012. "BOKO HARAM and JIHAD in NIGERIA".

to an ever-growing student youth with a strong anti-government rhetoric, who in the 1980s unleashed attacks in several cities in northern Nigeria, targeting both religious figures and the army, which had intervened to quell what was called the Maitatsine crisis. When his followers in the Kano region started a violent uprising, Mohammed Marwa also lost his life. This did not stop the movement, which continued to provoke riots in other northern towns, including Bulumkutu and Kaduna in 1982, Yola in 1984, Bauchi in 1985, and Gombe⁴⁴. This was considered to be one of the most violent and bloodiest crisis in the region. Many scholars as expressed by Adesoji considered the centrality of the economic aspect in this uprising⁴⁵. Marwa's call was in some ways very similar to that of Don Fodio, the aim of the insurrection was to purge the north of Nigeria once again of a corrupt ruling class that was widening the economic gap between the north and south of the country. The context of the insurgency may be also derived from the influence posed by the Islamic Revolution that was happening in Iran in 1979, as a result of which violence between Christians and Muslims living in the northern part of Nigeria broke out. Moreover, the drafting of a new constitution in 1978 was dealing with issues regarding the willingness of some to implement *Sharia* law as the judicial system operating in the area under Muslims majority. This inevitably led to a sharp debate between Christians and Muslims.⁴⁶ These events gave an impetus to the radicalisation of Muslims in Nigeria, which was paralleled by another phenomenon closely linked to Boko Haram. In 1978, under the leadership of Sheikh Mahmud Abu-bakar Gumi, the Izala movement was born.

⁴⁴ Adesoji, Abimbola. 2010. "The Boko Haram Uprising and Islamic Revivalism in Nigeria." *Africa Spectrum* 45 (2): 95–108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000203971004500205>.

⁴⁵ Adesoji, Abimbola 2011. "Between Maitatsine and Boko Haram: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Response of the Nigerian State." *Africa Today* 57 (4): 99. <https://doi.org/10.2979/africatoday.57.4.99>.

⁴⁶ Hickey, Raymond. "The 1982 Maitatsine Uprisings in Nigeria: A Note."

To sum up the opinion regarding insurgencies in Nigeria, Iyekekpolo's research highlights how economic difficulties gave rise to strong popular frustration, which then degenerated into violence. Similarly, according to Adesoji, socio-economic conditions were responsible for the emergence of both the Maitatsine and Boko Haram crises. In particular, what these insurgencies have in common is their ability to appeal to the grievances of the population and to legitimise the use of violence against those deemed responsible for such suffering. All this under the ideological umbrella of Islam, calling for a return to Islamic caliphates controlled by Sharia law and to live under the strictest and purest commands of the Qur'an. The research conducted by Tochukwu Omenma, Abada, and Onyinyechi Omenm expressed very precisely the influence of all these events, stating that the emergence of Boko Haram arose from a mixture of different factors, primarily grievances, be they social, economic, or political, within the framework of an Islamic reformist agenda, which took its inspiration from the principles of Izala, the influence of Wahhabism and Salafism more generally, and, finally, the political impulse that looked to the recreation of the Caliphate of the nineteenth century⁴⁷.

3.7 The beginning of the Boko Haram insurgency

Islamic radicalism has therefore taken roots in Nigeria as elsewhere, increasing the country's diversity. This was felt even more profoundly when a change within Nigeria's socio-political sphere occurred. In 1999 the military dictatorship end and it began the first democratic rule, in a country that was, however, extremely fragmented. The new constitution under President Olusegun Obasanjo divided Nigeria into 36 federal states. The democratisation process has on the one hand given rise to a feeling of openness to

⁴⁷Tochukwu Omena, J., Ifeanyichukwu M. Abada, and Z. Onyinyechi Omenma. 2020. "Boko Haram Insurgency: A Decade of Dynamic Evolution and Struggle for a Caliphate." *Security Journal* 33 (376-400). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41284-020-00233-7>.

new political possibilities for the Muslim community in the north and on the other a renewed feeling of political and social exclusion due to the presidency of a Christian figure from the south of Nigeria. Both perceptions fuelled an already present process of advocacy for *Sharia law*, seen now more than ever as a possibility, to gain power again⁴⁸. At the end of the same year, the governor of the state of Zamfara decided on his own to impose *Sharia* as the only recognised legal system in force in his territory. This event is followed by other member states opposing state secularisation, which according to the constitution prevents the adoption of any religion as state religion. Once again, violent protests have emerged between Christians and Muslims. But not only this, in 1999 the Izala movement split into two factions following internal tensions and mainly generational conflicts, as well as disputes over leadership after the death of leader Gumi. The Arabic term Izala stands for 'removing', hence the full name of the group would be 'Society for the Removal of Heretical Innovation and the Establishment of the Sunna'⁴⁹. The group's main objectives are already quite clear from how it calls itself. The leader Gumi emerged in Nigeria between the 1960s and 1970s as a prolific preacher and strong opponent of Sufism, which was largely representing the Nigerian elite in the late 1990s. The growing influence of global Salafism influenced Izala's youth, who found the group's efforts inadequate. Those returning from universities in Medina, therefore, declared themselves independent under the name 'Ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama's', translated as 'the people of the Sunna and the community'⁵⁰. From this faction with more radical tendencies emerges the figure Yusuf, a student of a prominent scholar, Ja'far Mahmud Adam, from

⁴⁸ Amaechi, Kingsley Ekene, and Rendani Tshifhumulo. 2019. "Unpacking the Socio-Political Background of the Evolution of Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria: A Social Movement Theory Approach." *Journal for the Study of Religion* 32 (2). <https://doi.org/10.17159/2413-3027/2019/v32n2a1>.

⁴⁹Thurston, Alex. 2017. "Salafism in Northern Nigeria beyond Boko Haram." Council on Foreign Relations. January 2017. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/salafism-northern-nigeria-beyond-boko-haram>.

⁵⁰Thurston, Alex."Salafism in Northern Nigeria beyond Boko Haram."

whom the former later on distanced himself. The movement was not anti-establishment per se but advocated for a society based on the teachings of Islam and discouraged Western education as well as from relying on the state. Upon Ja'far's mysterious death, Yusuf was able to cultivate the base of support around him. His criticism of the West took a more radical form, a departure from secular forms of statehood in an attempt to create, again, an entirely Islamic state separate from the established one. Yusuf distanced himself from the Izala movement embracing a totally prohibitive view on Western education, with a strong criticism of the Nigerian secular system, which has been reason for clashes with his mentor Ja'far who instead proposed an Islamisation of institutions through a conscious adoption of Western education⁵¹. The total rejection of the recognition of present institutions was also manifested in the group's initial migration out of society, as professed by the prophet Muhammad when referring to Hijra⁵². According to Iyekekpolo they looked for assistance in Yobe and in the rural land of Dapchi where they had issues with the local villagers, resulting in the killing by the Nigerian forces of some of the members⁵³. The village of Kanama is also reported to have been a destination of Salafi-oriented youths, where they aimed to establish a true Islamic society and operate for the ousting of the Nigerian government as well as Western presence⁵⁴. At the same time, Yusuf in Maiduguri took advantage of a political situation to gain visibility and ground. From 2001 President Obasanjo was actively campaigning for a second legislature, despite several criticisms coming from the Muslim community⁵⁵. Several activists started intense advocacy for the deposition of Obasanjo and the establishment of *Sharia* all around the

⁵¹ Loimeier, Roman. "Boko Haram: The Development of a Militant Religious Movement in Nigeria."

⁵² Cook, David. 2014. "BOKO HARAM: A NEW ISLAMIC STATE in NIGERIA." INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY RICE UNIVERSITY.

⁵³ Iyekekpolo, "Boko Haram: Understanding the Context."

⁵⁴ Amaechi, Kingsley Ekene, and Rendani Tshifhumulo. "Unpacking the Socio-Political Background of the Evolution of Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria: A Social Movement Theory Approach."

⁵⁵ Amaechi, Kingsley Ekene, and Rendani Tshifhumulo. "Unpacking the Socio-Political Background of the Evolution of Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria: A Social Movement Theory Approach."

region. Among them, Yusuf took his opportunity. By allying himself with Senator Ali Modu Sheriff, he sought to prevent the second term of the governor of Borno who was not sympathetic to his cause. Senator Sheriff took advantage of the support of Yusuf's young followers, who hoped to see the strict implementation of *Sharia* law, and managed to win the elections in 2003. This has allowed the group to operate almost undisturbed under political cover⁵⁶. Yusuf was criticised by his followers who considered him not ready for violence, but according to some academics as Comolli, he was just biding his time⁵⁷. Amaechi and Tshifhumulo as well referred to him as a jihadist, because he considered permissible to change the established order through the use of violence⁵⁸. Although some positions in government were given to both Yusuf and some of his followers, there was heavy dissatisfaction with the governor's failure to implement *Sharia* law. In response to this Yusuf took increasingly heavy positions until in 2009 in a context of increasing clashes between the civilian population and government forces, the group found its opportunity to erupt into violence. Due to Yusuf increased references to *jihad*, the event is thought to have been planned. The analysis of Iyekekpolo contextualise this within the broader experience of insurgency in Nigeria, because Yusuf as his predecessors capitalize a political opportunity to implement the *jihad*⁵⁹. Banally, clashes concerning the use of helmets for motorcyclists resulted in the death of some policemen and some Boko Haram members during the confrontations. Since then, the situation escalated into a full-scale armed insurrection and marked the death of Yusuf.

⁵⁶ Azfal, Madiha. 2020. "FROM 'WESTERN EDUCATION IS FORBIDDEN' to the WORLD'S DEADLIEST TERRORIST GROUP EDUCATION and BOKO HARAM in NIGERIA ." *Foreign Policy at Brookings*.

⁵⁷ Kfir, Isaac. 2016. "Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency by Virginia Comolli." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 28 (1): 140–42. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etw049>.

⁵⁸ Amaechi, Kingsley Ekene, and Rendani Tshifhumulo. "Unpacking the Socio-Political Background of the Evolution of Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria: A Social Movement Theory Approach."

⁵⁹ Iyekekpolo, "Boko Haram: Understanding the Context."

3.5 Same origins different insurgencies: Boko Haram vs. ISWAP

In 2015, Boko Haram, whose official name is *Jamaat-u-AhlisSunna-Lidda-Awati Wal-Jihad* - "the organisation committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and jihad has been considered the deadliest terrorist group, with a kill rate of thousands of people in Nigeria and more than two million displaced. Achieving great expansion and capacities, Boko Haram's extremely brutal methods have however resulted in the separation of the group into two main factions and not least provoked a heavy reaction from government forces. This is largely due to the type of strategies adopted by the insurgency of Shekau, the leader who succeeded Yusuf. The analysis of the type of insurgency strategies followed by Boko Haram will be presented in relation to that of its splinter faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province. Having originated from the same movement, they draw on the same common radical ideology, which is elaborated on the teachings of Salafism. The Yusuf insurgency, first of all, is portrayed by Stoddard, among others already mentioned, as one of the many revivalist groups that have been present in Nigeria, which aim at bringing society back to the first generation of Muslims, in its purest form⁶⁰. To echo the distinctions with regard to the Salafist current presented by Wiktorowicz, Yusuf could first be represented in terms of a politico-salafist and only at a later stage when it was clear that he could not make the desired changes alongside the state, did he switch to the jihadi-salafist faction. This initiated the insurgency, which he did not lead, however, but which was instead led by Shekau, a figure much more prone to jihad. Shekau defines the character of Boko Haram, in which two concepts in particular of Salafist teachings play a key role: that of 'loyalty and disavowal' and that of

⁶⁰ Stoddard, Edward. 2019. "Revolutionary Warfare? Assessing the Character of Competing Factions within the Boko Haram Insurgency." *African Security* 12 (3-4): 300–329. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2019.1668632>.

'excommunication'⁶¹. The first concept defines the relationship between Muslims, which should be one of exclusive loyalty and disavowal with the non-Muslim community, while the second concerns the definition of an infidel⁶². These are the aspects that will most distinguish Boko Haram from ISWAP. Shekau, regarding the former, *al-wala wa-l-bara*, adopts a very restrictive interpretation, while in the latter, *takfir*, adopts a very broad one. This results, in relation to the former concept, has a strong criticism of Nigerian leaders and in relation to the latter in a wide range of people considered apostates and infidels. Shekau's personal and specific interpretation goes beyond even traditional jihadi thinking, in that according to him anyone who does not support his group should be considered an infidel and therefore be targeted. Paradoxically, Boko Haram has no real strategy for gaining the support and acceptance of the population, which in fact is totally lacking precisely because of this extreme targeting of violence on civilians. Stoddard proposes a view of this insurgency in the scheme of Revolutionary warfare, identifying the elements whereby ISWAP fits most closely with this definition while Shkeau's faction departs from it. Absolutely central among these is the concept of *takfirism*, from which derives different popular support for one or the other faction. ISWAP departs from this expansive view of excommunication and, moreover, in line with Stoddard's revolutionary warfare approach, ISWAP not only avoids targeting Muslim populations, but has demonstrated that it engages in political strategies to attract them and gain their support. This, according to Stoddard's analysis is contextualised within the framework of revolutionary warfare strategy. It too does not have a single and unique definition but refers traditionally to the theorisations of Mao TseTung and before him to the Marxist-Leninist revolution, from

⁶¹ Stoddard. "Revolutionary Warfare? Assessing the Character of Competing Factions within the Boko Haram Insurgency."

⁶² Ibrahim, Ibrahim Yahaya. "The Wave of Jihadist Insurgency in West Africa: Global Ideology, Local Context, Individual Motivations."

which he develops his alternative. Stoddard outlines three fundamental characteristics to describe revolutionary warfare.

First of all, the presence of a revolutionary ideology, which both groups, having the same origin, present. A radical ideology that sets itself revolutionary goals, including the conquest of territory with the aim of establishing a new socio-political order. The nature of the insurgency is therefore politically radical in its aims, Boko Haram follows an ideology in its aims as well as in its strategies. The latter, the strategies of action, constitute the element of diversity with ISWAP, but remain in both cases tied to an ideology. The ultimate goal is the political transformation of the established order in Nigeria and the spread of Sharia law. The second element represents the centrality of this analysis, and that is the strategy of developing and consolidating popular support for the purpose of the insurgency and the methods of it. Mao in his theorising places much emphasis on the aspect of local support, using an analogy to describe the guerrillas and the population, the former being the 'fish' swimming in the 'sea' of popular support⁶³. Another way in which Mao emphasises the importance of the local population is through the concept of legitimacy, that in fighting an insurgency, insurgents need support and thus find a way to legitimise their tactics and strategies in the eyes of the population. For example, the interpretation of *takfir* serves to define who the targets of violence are, who the targets to be hit are, and in order to receive support, this practice must be endorsed, it must seem morally acceptable. In this regard, it can be deduced how Boko Haram differs from ISWAP. The latter have more faithfully followed this revolutionary warfare approach, understanding the importance of the population in order to keep the insurgency alive and receive the necessary support from it, be it material resource, reliable intelligence or in terms of recruitments. Shekau's extensive brutality against the civilian

⁶³ Kiras, *Irregular Warfare: Terrorism and Insurgency*.

population or the failure to involve them in a strategy of protection and support meant that they became increasingly alienated from the Boko Haram cause. ISWAP has taken advantage of this situation, treating the population differently, trying not to target (not always, and it will be explained why) the Muslim community, posing both as protectors from the other faction and as guarantors of security in broader terms, from criminal or abusive security forces. ISWAP wove its relations with the population by providing services that the population needed and thus gained greater popularity. The third element concerns a shift in military strategy from the initial rural guerrilla warfare to a more conventional and capable military activity. This aspect is part of Mao's proposed stages of insurgency. First, there is the so-called 'strategic defensive' in which the insurgency finds itself in a condition of inferiority that prompts it to avoid direct confrontation but instead resort extensively to guerrilla warfare strategy in order to stretch enemy resources. In this phase, the group is embedded among the local population, which is vital for advancement. The next phase is the strategic stalemate phase in which the insurgency targets the enemy in a prolonged battle of attrition, through raids on military outposts, attacks on supply lines etc. The objective is to undermine the response capability and morale of government forces in an attempt to force a withdrawal of these forces that may leave ground for the insurgency conquest. Finally arriving at the last stage, the 'strategic counter-offensive', stemming from the strength they had time to build during the strategic stalemate, the insurgents can now destroy the enemy, who is now in a defensive position, by the employment of guerrilla tactics, but these tactics now take on a subsidiary role as the group is now able to fight through more conventional military tactics and strategies. The last aspect characterising the revolutionary warfare proposed by Stoddard and the phases of the Maoist-type insurgency presented find representation in the events characterising the evolution of ISWAP. One can place the phase immediately following the split, hence going from 2016 until around 2018, as an initial strategic defensive, then

thereafter a peak in activity and escalation of violence can be traced back to the stalemate phase, in which, however, I personally think the group still finds itself.

4. Theoretical Framework

This research presents the evolution of the Islamic State West Africa Province under the theoretical lens of the population-centric approach to insurgency. In fact, ISWAP's expansion but especially its consolidation as the main destabilising force in West Africa derives largely from the group's ability to have adopted a so-called population-centric approach. Most of the literature on insurgency identifies the role of the population as being of great importance⁶⁴. First and foremost, the population is sought for material support, in terms of food, shelter, money, fuel, or other. Material support can also come from taxation, for example, as in the case of ISWAP. The resources needed can also be understood in terms of information; the local population is an excellent source of intelligence. There can be a more or less coercive method for obtaining the same resources. Secondly, the population is a recruiting base, as insurgency is an asymmetrical fight against state armies, increasing its numbers helps to balance this asymmetry. Not only that, it helps prevent the support of the population from being directed towards government forces, which is counterproductive for the insurgency. Therefore, if the insurgents gain the support and admiration of the local communities, they can have a much easier existence. ISWAP's approach to the local population, and more specifically its approach to violence against civilians, has given great impetus to ISWAP's growth and establishment as the predominant faction, vis-à-vis the mother cell Boko Haram, or Jaso as it will take its name after the split. As Stoddard proposes, this choice parallels the ideological role, hence the debate as to who is to be considered an apostate and thus a

⁶⁴Berlingozzi, Laura, and Ed Stoddard. 2020. "Assessing Misaligned Counterinsurgency Practice in Niger and Nigeria."

permissible target, but it is above all a cost-benefit strategic thinking regarding the operations to be carried out. Moreover, Stoddard also links this strategic thinking to the influence played by the IS core. Thus, the fact that ISWAP resorted less to acts of extreme violence against civilians than JAS, preferring to focus on military targets, does not translate into a total disappearance of violence against civilians. It is more a matter of strategic choices. This is explained by Stoddard as a strategic hearts and minds approach. ISWAP does not spare civilians out of the goodness of their hearts, but tends towards an insurgency approach, as seen in the previous paragraph, reminiscent of revolutionary warfare in which the population plays a vital role in sustaining the insurgency and therefore maintaining it. To explain this technical choice of ISWAP, Stoddard makes use of the concept of 'competitive control' formulated by Kilcullen⁶⁵. Similarly, Ingram in his research refers to the same concept, referring to Fall's 'competitive system of control' and 'competitive system of meaning' of which the former refers to the use of politico-military activities aimed at both eliminating the enemy and gaining popular support. While the second refers to propaganda and influence activities aimed at shaping the perception of the conflict in one's favour⁶⁶.

To better understand the theory of competitive control, Kilcullen describes it as follows: 'the local armed actor that a given population perceives as most capable of establishing a regulatory system for resilient, full-spectrum control over violence, economic activity and human security is most likely to prevail within that population's residential area'⁶⁷. In this

⁶⁵ Stoddard, Edward. 2023. "Competitive Control? 'Hearts and Minds' and the Population Control Strategy of the Islamic State West Africa Province." *African Security* 16 (1): 32–60.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2023.2192158>.

⁶⁶ Ingram, Haroro. 2021. "The Long Jihad the Islamic State's Method of Insurgency: Control, Meaning, & the Occupation of Mosul in Context." *Program on Extremism*. The George Washington University.
<https://doi.org/10.4079/poe.05.2021.03>.

⁶⁷ Uenver, Hamid Akin. 2016. "WEAK STATES, STRONG NONSTATE ACTORS: THEORY of COMPETITIVE CONTROL in NORTHERN SYRIA." *Ortadoğu Etütleri* 8 (1).

sense, this theory assumes that an insurgency is fought first to gain the support of a population. ISWAP in this sense, acts on the contested population, both by undermining the functionality and ability of the state to reach out to the population and meet their needs, and to prevent this role from being taken over by a rival faction. In this sense, it can be said that ISWAP has almost had its way paved, if one considers that among the factors that are acknowledged to have facilitated the proliferation of these violent insurgencies is the lack of state presence, a lack of governance that has impacted on the population. High levels of corruption, the inability of the state to provide adequate levels of security for the population, the widening economic gap between the north and south of the country, which is reflected in the lack of basic services, are all factors that have contributed to the development of Boko Haram⁶⁸. In fact, as already mentioned, the insurgency in the northern part of Nigeria is and has been a struggle for governance, for political control. In fact, this approach also lays the groundwork for understanding that concept of rebel governance that ISWAP has tried and also succeeded in applying in the controlled territories and those over which it has not been able to have direct control. Indeed, another peculiar and very important aspect of ISWPA is the fact that the group was able to focus its efforts on population control rather than expanding geographically without consolidating its presence. ISWAP succeeds through this population-centric approach in providing a range of services to the population, from which it also receives valuable resources for its own survival, which the state was struggling to provide. And because of this, it manages to have a good grip and control over the local population. On the one hand, JAS has been accused of numerous massacres and a predatory style toward the population as a resource. On the other hand, the government has displaced numerous people under the counterinsurgency strategy of IDP (internal displaced persons) camps,

⁶⁸ Hassan, Idayat. 2022. "Rebel Governance? A Literature Review of Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province." *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs* 0800 (0018).

as well as blocking roads functional to trade and other economic activities in order to cut off the livelihoods of JAS, while undermining the standard of living of the population. ISWAP has inserted itself in this context by providing physical protection, providing health care basic services, promoting economic activities and providing soft-loans as well as establishing a taxation system. In part, it has been able to provide some level of education and establish a judicial system to resolve local disputes through Sharia courts. ISWAP was able to create a governance model⁶⁹. The same assertion can be deduced from research published by Perez in 2022 that investigates the capabilities, resources, and opportunities of various Salafi-jihadist groups that may be functional to their strength, effectiveness and resilience. It first defines the level of interaction of each group with the local population, and their ability to band with it according to a number of factors⁷⁰. The factors taken into consideration are the provision of social services, the exercise of social control, the effective use of propaganda, the exploitation of local networks, and the mobilisation of the population (which measures the level of grievances of the local population pushing it against the state authority or other segments of the population). Perez's assessment of ISWAP's governance capacity according to these elements is quite high. In fact, the results show a high level of ISWAP's capacity to provide social services, acting as a de facto ruler. Then, among the lower levels, a medium-moderate level of social control that stands for an intermittent involvement of the group on the social structure of the population. Subsequently, a moderate level presents the factor concerning the mobilisation of the population, showing how the protracted conflict situation in the

⁶⁹ International Crisis Group. 2019. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province." Crisis Group. May 16, 2019. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/273-facing-challenge-islamic-state-west-africa-province>.

⁷⁰ Emily Estelle Perez. 2022. "The Underestimated Insurgency, Continued: Salafi-Jihadi Capabilities and Opportunities in Africa." Policycommons.net. American Enterprise Institute. December 12, 2022. <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/3336532/the-underestimated-insurgency-continued/4135378>.

region, an intermittent form of abuse by government forces and a persistent level of hostility between the various groups of the population, plays in ISWAP's favour. Also, the effective use of propaganda reflected in high-quality media and a moderate level of exploitation of local networks, by which is meant cooperation with the local population, as well as with alliances outside the group. In the case of ISWAP for instance, engagement with armed banditry was emphasised in order to forge alliances to guarantee the security of the population under its control. All in all, ISWAP managed to position itself as a more attractive alternative in the Nigerian context and thus gain advantage from its position, doing what JAS failed to do and thus gaining an edge over the rival force. Moreover, this approach shows ISWAP as a much more resilient and thus threatening group that appears even more difficult to eradicate. This also shows an approach that allows a rebel group that does not have control over territory in the conventional sense to still exercise extensive control over it, through the control of the population and the extraction of resources in the territory.

5. Shekau leadership and the pledge of allegiance to IS

Muhammad Yusuf's death marked a pivotal moment for Boko Haram, as the group underwent a transformation under the leadership of its new leader, Abubakar Shekau. It transitioned from a low-level insurgency to a more organized and violently active terrorist group. In an audio message announcing his leadership, Shekau also provided the group with an official name, the Sunni Group for the Propagation of the Prophet's Teaching and Jihad (JAS), drawing inspiration from the Izala Society movement. Shekau believed that to apostrophe the group this way, JAS for simplification, was more appropriate than Boko Haram, which he considered reductive and pejorative. On a media level, Shekau's sermons and messages differed significantly from those of Yusuf. Shekau moved away

from Yusuf's ideological focus, instead resorting to threats and declarations of war. In a video message from 2014, the group expressed its desire to establish a state-like entity, referred to as the "Sultane of Allah" by Shekau. This marked the first explicit formulation of a political objective by JAS. Despite occasionally referencing Yusuf's ideas during the early stages of his leadership, Shekau did not enjoy the same level of admiration as his predecessor. On the contrary, he was widely criticized and discussed, both ideologically and strategically. His brutality and oppressive rule became notable factors in the subsequent divisions within Boko Haram. However, the extensive use of violence and the implementation of a more structured administrative system did bring considerable progress to the insurgency. Between 2010 and 2015, JAS expanded its reach, extending its operations to major cities and even achieving the conquest of Maiduguri. JAS demonstrated an evolution from rudimentary guerrilla tactics to improved tactical and technical capabilities, employing methods such as mass killings through bombings, suicide attacks, and the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on strategic targets. Geographically, JAS's influence reached its peak between 2014 and 2015, primarily in the northeastern parts of Nigeria. As indicated in the referenced study, JAS controlled four local governments in Adamawa State (Michika, Madagali, Mubi North, and Mubi South) as well as several key areas in Borno State, including Gwoza, Bama, Marte, and Ngala⁷¹. However, Boko Haram's momentum in terms of strength and power comes at a significant cost. The group faced severe criticism and internal divisions, further exacerbated by the decisive defeats inflicted upon them by the Nigerian counterinsurgency forces. Shekau faces accusations on both the ideological and strategic dimensions. The brutal persecution of defectors and dissidents has drawn strong criticism due to the excessive use of violence against JAS members themselves. One of the most

⁷¹ Tochukwu Omena, J., Ifeanyiichukwu M. Abada, and Z. Onyinyechi Omenma. "Boko Haram Insurgency: A Decade of Dynamic Evolution and Struggle for a Caliphate."

contentious and divisive aspects within the ideological spectrum is the definition of who is considered an infidel, or kafir, and therefore a potential target⁷². Shekau's interpretation of takfir was deemed excessively narrow and radical, as he regarded anyone outside his group, as violators of the Islamic faith. While Boko Haram traditionally targeted government and police forces, as well as Western entities, Shekau's broadened approach categorized anyone associated with government forces as legitimate targets. This included aid workers and individuals who refused to submit to his control, which means civilian populations suffered his campaign of atrocities. Strong criticism was also levelled at the choice of enlisting women and girls as suicide bombers. Consequently, during the peak of the insurgency in 2014-2015, JAS gained notoriety as one of the deadliest terrorist groups due to a significant escalation in indiscriminate violence⁷³. The group garnered global attention in April 2014 through a particularly egregious attack, which was part of Shekau's campaign against educational institutions. The abduction of 200 Chibok school girls attracted international attention and earned Shekau a moment of global infamy for the atrocity of the act he had just committed. This incident showed the group's ability to carry out large-scale attacks and install a pervasive sense of fear and instability thereby destabilising the entire region. Shekau's leadership bears responsibility for exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad region, which has resulted in heightened levels of instability, insecurity, and mass displacement. In response to the relentless advances and escalating violence of JAS, the Nigerian government took decisive action and initiated a significant counter-offensive in 2015. The government forces intervened with the aim of curtailing the growing influence of the terrorist group and restoring stability in the affected regions. This marked a turning point in the conflict as the Nigerian army sought to dismantle Boko Haram's operational capabilities and reclaim territories under

⁷³ Institute of Economics and Peace, Global Terrorism Index of 2016: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism, Report no. 43, November 2016: 47

their control. By March of that year, the counter-insurgency operations proved to be remarkably successful as JAS suffered a major setback. They lost Gwoza, the proclaimed capital of their self-proclaimed "proto-state" since August 2014 and gradually lost control of other significant towns in Borno state⁷⁴. This forced the group to retreat from urban centers to more remote and rural areas and consolidate their presence particularly in the Sambisa Forest, which became Shekau's stronghold, and the mountains east of Gwoza. The forest became a strategic stronghold for JAS, allowing them to regroup, plan, and launch sporadic attacks. Additionally, the mountains east of Gwoza also served as a refuge for the group, offering natural barriers and difficult-to-access hideouts.

5.1 A fascination for the Islamic State achievements

Shekau's dissidents and critics leveraged these significant setbacks to question his leadership capabilities, accusing him of strategic incompetence and failure to capitalise on the momentum and resources available, which ultimately led to territorial losses and the stagnation of the insurgency's advance. Thus, the divisions within Boko Haram can be attributed to two distinct but intertwining dimensions that played a crucial role simultaneously: internal group dynamics and external factors related to the external jihadist landscape. Internally, as mentioned earlier, support for Abubakar Shekau has steadily eroded due to the brutality of his approach and the critical defeats suffered by the JAS. Shekau's heavy-handed tactics, characterised by indiscriminate violence and persecution of defectors and dissidents, have attracted widespread criticism and weakened his position within the group. Externally, JAS leaders looked at the evolving *jihad* situation in the Levant with admiration. The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 significantly influenced the group's dynamics and led to opposition to Shekau's leadership. As ISIS successfully consolidated power in the territories it

⁷⁴ OECD/SWAC (2023), *Urbanisation and Conflicts in North and West Africa*, West African Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3fc68183-en>.

controlled, culminating in the capture of Mosul in April of that year, the group rebranded itself as the Islamic State and established a caliphate under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. These developments brought African militants closer to ISIS, prompting members of JAS to consider affiliating with the Islamic State for their own strategic advantage, rather than the other way around. It could be said that the expansion of the Islamic State on the African continent was the consequence of an opportunistic calculation on both sides. While ISIS gained prominence in the Middle East, JAS saw the benefits of aligning with the Islamic State in order to further advance their insurgency. However, it also became a move driven by opportunistic calculation by JAS's top leaders, who were hoping that Shekau could be replaced as leader. Shekau was reluctant to officially declare allegiance to al-Baghdadi as it would pose a risk to his power and position as a leader, (at that time Shekau also recaptured the role of imam, therefore spiritual leader) downgrading him as governor, or *wali*, which could also potentially limit his control and subject him to direct orders from IS-core.

As a result of the great pressure from the *shura* to pledge allegiance, Shekau tried to stall by insisting on meeting al-Baghdadi personally first or citing his previous connections with al-Qaeda as an excuse. Even though Shekau was really reluctant to submit to the *caliph's* command, he also found the exacerbation of internal fragmentation very worrying. He feared that the persistent communication held by intermediaries, mainly al-Barnawi with the Islamic State counterpart, would lead to his removal and internal rebellion⁷⁵. Nevertheless, the heavy losses during 2015 of several cities by the counter-offensive fuelled pressure from JAS members to form an alliance with the Islamic State, which could provide aid in terms of material resources, strategic guidance, and prestige

⁷⁵ Zenn, Jacob. "The Islamic State's Provinces on the Peripheries: Juxtaposing the Pledges from Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf and Maute Group in the Philippines." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 (2019): 87–104. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26590511>.

and recognition. On 7th March 2015, shortly before the seizure of the main cities under JAS control, Shekau eventually pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi, a clear sign of resignation and despair under strong internal and external pressure.

6. ISWAP internal crisis and IS influence on the leadership

After pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State in 2015, JAS did not solve all its internal problems. On the contrary, the fledgling Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) faced a prolonged leadership crisis for the next three years⁷⁶. This crisis can be understood through three significant events that unfolded within the group transition from Boko Haram to ISWAP and also thereafter.

The first crisis emerged at the outset of the transition and reached a turning point around 2016, primarily revolving around criticisms of Shekau's leadership style and methods. One of his most ardent adversaries was Nur Maaman, the second-in-command and top lieutenant of Boko Haram's founder Mohammed Yusuf. Disagreements between Nur and Shekau dated back to Yusuf's death in 2009, prompting Nur to initially leave the group and gain experience with other jihadist organizations, to rejoin Shekau in the Sambisa Forest later. It is believed that he already had close ties with ISIS at the time and was among those advocating for a stronger affiliation with the Islamic State as contacts between the two groups began. When he returned between 2014 and 2015, however, he continued his line of criticism of Shekau and, alongside al-Barnawi, Yusuf's son, found himself leading a group of ISWAP members critical of the Shekau's leadership.

⁷⁶ Bukarti, Bulama . 2022. "IT'S a BIT TRICKY: EXPLORING ISIS'S TIES with BOKO HARAM." George Washington University: Program on Extremism.

The internal divisions within Shekau's leadership therefore did not dissipate once he swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi but continued to recognise his extreme violence as both an obstacle to achieving broader global goals and a disincentive for militants. Consequently, not long after the oath, towards the end of 2015, Nur left the Sambisa Forest stronghold with the intention of establishing his own camp. He was joined by Abu Musab al-Barnawi, who, due to his direct lineage as Yusuf's son and intermediate of the initial connection with al-Baghdadi had gained sympathy from the Islamic State leadership. They saw in him a potentially better leader to the current one, hoping that he could rally fighters loyal to his father against Shekau. Nur and al-Barnawi relocated a group of prominent members to the Alagarno Forest and engaged in a struggle for power against Shekau, requesting intervention from the Islamic State in their support as mediator. However, despite letters and video conferences involving Shekau, al-Barnawi, and al-Baghdadi, mediated negotiations failed to make any progress and further aggravated the situation of insubordination.

The intervention of the Islamic State, in response to the request of Nur and al-Barnawi, proved successful for the two dissenting figures. Already favoring al-Barnawi as Shekau's successor, they received support for their plea. With ISIS backing, Nur and al-Barnawi consolidated their position in Yobe and Borno States and initiated a series of independent operations. Moreover, Shekau's strong criticism and the support of ISIS led to numerous defections, rapidly expanding the ranks of the dissident faction. In this sense, Nur and al-Barnawi can be considered the true founders of ISWAP, shaping its modus operandi. The first major attack conducted by ISWAP was reported on ISIS social media platforms as a media operation aimed at legitimizing the emerging faction and showcasing its success. Just over a year after Shekau's oath of allegiance, in August 2016, as a result of this first dispute, al-Barnawi was appointed as the new "*wali*" or governor of ISWAP. It must be emphasised that a number of factors influenced the split from Shekau's leadership. While

the IS-core expressed disapproval of Shekau's brutal methods and tactics, it is important to note that the disagreements within ISWAP had much deeper causes that went beyond IS influence. Therefore, it can be concluded that the separation from Shekau's leadership was the result of factors intrinsic to ISWAP itself, indicating that the separation would probably have occurred independently of the IS-core relationship.

6.1 The elimination of Nur

Therefore, despite the emergence of the new faction with the full support of ISIS, the rift within ISWAP persisted characterized by two distinct currents of thought. On one hand, there were those who still saw the presence of Shekau, now as a rival faction, as an obstacle to their struggle, while on the other hand, some members felt discouraged by the strong pressure exerted by the Nigerian government forces, which in those years were leading a strong counterinsurgency. This, therefore, led them to contemplate the direction of surrendering and reaching an agreement with the authorities. This current most probably included Nur and laid the roots of the second leadership crisis and inevitably Nur execution. Several sources have tried to shed light on the dynamics surrounding the killing of Nur, which circumstancing are still subject to various interpretations. Therefore, three aspects that serve as an explanation for the execution of Nur and why this represented the second crisis will be mentioned.

The first aspect concerns differing opinions on Nur's relationship with the group's leadership decision. According to some, he seemed to have openly accepted al-Barnawi's leadership; according to others, this was done with strong resentment on Nur's part. An audio recording of an ISWAP communiqué, analyzed by Boko Haram scholar Abdulbasit Kassim in June 2019, contradicted an earlier report published by Crisis Group.⁷⁷ The

⁷⁷ Bukarti, Bulama. 2019. "New Audio Offers Potential Window into ISWA Decision-Making." Council on Foreign Relations. June 13, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/new-audio-offers-potential-window-iswa-decision-making>.

Crisis Group report suggested that Nur had willingly stepped aside for al-Barnawi due to his respectable lineage as Yusuf's son, presenting the relationship between Nur and al-Barnawi friendlier than it probably was.⁷⁸ However, according to a series of interviews carried out by the Institute for Security Studies, Nur appeared to have been the one appointed by al-Baghdadi to take the leadership, but he decided to step aside for unknown reasons⁷⁹. On the contrary, subsequent sources show a very different narrative of events. The Council on Foreign Relations reported that the *shura*, a consultative assembly in charge of the nomination of a leader, during a meeting aimed at substitute Shekau, showed agreement to consider al-Barnawi. However, Nur strongly opposed this decision and nominated himself as a candidate, considering himself more suitable and experienced for the role. This behind-the-scenes version of events would shed light on the reasons behind Nur's killing. Indeed, according to Bukarti, the second leadership crisis was triggered around 2018 by the failure of Nur's leadership bid. From then on, it is believed that Nur waged a campaign of sabotage against both al-Barnawi and ISWAP as a whole. The second issue picks up the thread of dissenting currents within the group. Nur was part of that circle of people who were considering making contact with the Nigerian government authorities with the intention of defecting from the insurgency. This demonstrates the extreme fragmentation, with the presence of factions within ISWAP that considered alternative paths, including seeking reconciliation and defection. Moreover, this is considered a possible reason for his elimination, in retaliation for his attempt to surrender to the authorities.

⁷⁸ International Crisis Group. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province."

⁷⁹ Mahmood, Omar, and Ndubuisi Ani. 2018. "Factional Dynamics within Boko Haram."

<https://issafrika.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/2018-07-06-research-report-2.pdf>.

A third element regards the handling of the hostage-taking incidents at the beginning of 2018. On 19th February that year, 112 schoolgirls and one boy were abducted in Dapchi, northern Yobe state, and about a month later, 107 of them were released. However, the release seems to have been done not without resistance and dissent within the group. In fact, Nur was accused of having led the negotiations, facilitated by Swiss mediation, with the Nigerian government for the hostages' release. Significantly, Nur's arrest and detention coincided with the release of the schoolgirls on March 21st, 2018. This event, among the previously mentioned factors, indicates that Nur's killing was motivated, at least in part, by his involvement in the negotiation and release of hostages. Further evidence of the significance attached to Nur's actions and his subsequent punishment is the execution of another ISWAP commander, Ali Gaga. Gaga was accused of having individually planned the release of hundreds of hostages.⁸⁰ Despite the fact that such actions could be punishable by immediate death according to Sharia law, ISWAP was internally divided also on this matter due to Nur's standing and influence among the fighters. Nur's status stemmed from his associations with the origins of Boko Haram, but above all he also represented that faction of the fighters who were tired of Shekau's violence, especially against the members themselves, and had left for that reason. As a result, ISWAP leaders adopted a more pragmatic approach by sending Nur to a nearby settlement. On his third day in exile, however, Nur made one last attempt to negotiate his exit from the conflict with the Nigerian government, which was blocked by ISWAP commanders. Perceiving this gesture as the third offense perpetrated by him, the punishment was now inevitable.

⁸⁰ AFP. 2018. "Boko Haram Kills Commander over Plan to Release 300 Hostages and Surrender." The Defense Post. September 30, 2018. <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2018/09/30/boko-haram-kill-commander-ali-gaga-plan-release-hostages-surrender-nigeria/>.

In making the final decision on Nur's fate, the Islamic State played a pivotal role. Caught up with the dilemma of making a divisive decision for the group, ISWAP decided to contact the Islamic State leadership for advice on how to proceed with Nur. Following consultations between the two sides, Al-Baghdadi gave the order for the execution of Nur Mamman. Although this decision was not fully endorsed within ISWAP, it was carried out as the instructions received from the caliph were considered binding.

6.2 An unstable leadership

The killing of Nur certainly caused a deep wound on the militants of ISWAP and thus reinforced quite a few internal divisions, which also extended to ethical and ideological considerations. Moreover, the killing of Nur marked the beginning of a series of hard-line militants in the leadership. Perhaps this laid the groundwork for the third leadership crisis. In March 2019, an audio recording released by ISWAP announced Abu Abdullah Ibn Umar al-Barnawi, also known as Ba Idrissa, as the new *wali*, or leader. However, there was considerable confusion surrounding this announcement, as subsequent statements (such as during the recognition of an attack in September 2019) continued to refer to al-Barnawi as the group's leader, despite the audio announcing his demotion to a shura. This inconsistency may be attributed to the lack of widespread acceptance of his removal among ISWAP members, leading to the departure of some top fighters, including Adam Bitri, a loyal military commander of al-Barnawi⁸¹. The lack of direct confirmation from both ISWAP and ISIS at the time further contributed to the sense of uncertainty regarding the dynamics of this leadership change. According to a Crisis Group report, the reasons for this change in leadership may have revolved around al-Barnawi's perceived

⁸¹ Barkindo, Atta. 2023. "Boko Haram-ISWAP and the Growing Footprint of Islamic State (IS) in Africa." *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 15 (2): 12–17. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48718087>.

inadequacy, or his ideological proximity to Nur, or even regarding his neutrality in the al-Qaeda-ISIS rivalry. In more general terms, the elimination of Nur appeared to necessitate the removal of al-Barnawi as well, because he was seen as the continuation of Nur's softer approach⁸². Other sources suggest that al-Barnawi's removal could be a result of his inability to escalate violence as demanded by ISIS, although this hypothesis does not explain the lack of recognition of this leadership change.⁸³ Consequently, it would seem that the new leadership of Ba Idrissa's seemed to promote a less tender approach leading to a gradual shift in ISWAP's modus operandi. According to Aliyu Dahiru, Ba Idrissa would have represented a relatively moderate figure, positioned halfway between Shekau's brutality and al-Barnawi's more compliant personality. However, this leadership was also short-lived. Within a couple of years Ba Idrissa was also purged from the group. The reasons for his removal likely stemmed from his inability to cope with the persistence of major internal division as well as with external threats. Disagreements have emerged regarding the attempt to maintain certain ideologies belonging to Shekau's current, mainly concerning the *takfir* and the weakening of clerical figures as opposed to a rise in the role of combatants⁸⁴. As a result, through a coup, Lawan Abubakar, known as Ba Lawan, assumed leadership in early 2020, ushering in a more violent and ruthless era. However, IS-core never officially recognized either Ba Idrissa, nor Ba Lawan, suggesting a loss of control over the West African affiliate. Sources within ISWAP, as cited by Bassim Al-

⁸² Kelly, Fergus. 2019. "Islamic State Enforced Leadership Change in West Africa Province, Audio Reveals." The Defense Post. March 15, 2019. <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/03/15/new-islamic-state-west-africa-leader-audio-nigeria/>.

⁸³ Dahiru, Aliyu. 2022. "ISWAP Rebrands, Expands Scope of Operations." HumAngle. October 1, 2022. <https://humanglemedia.com/iswap-rebrands-expands-scope-of-operations/>.

⁸⁴ Al-Hussaini, Bassim. 2020. "ISWAP, Terror Group in Nigeria, Rebrands, Reversing Tradition." Premiumtimesng.com. February 2020. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/379362-iswap-terror-group-in-nigeria-rebrands-reversing-tradition.html?tztc=1>.

Hussaini predicted an upsurge in violence in the region following the setback of the more clerical currents of the insurgency⁸⁵. This period was considered a very crucial time for the future of jihad in the Lake Chad Basin. It was a time when ISWAP could either emerge more united and stronger than before or disintegrate into numerous rival factions due to leadership feud⁸⁶. Despite the internal turmoil, these years demonstrated that the ISWAP insurgency was gaining momentum, with the number of attacks perpetrated by ISWAP ranking second only to IS central, as reported in the weekly newsletter al-Naba.

6.3 The return of al-Barnawi

Despite its military success, the persistent alternation of leadership exacerbated the fragility of the group. Unlike its JAS rivals, who remained under Shekau's leadership, ISWAP experienced a pattern of weak and short-lived leadership. Shekau's ability to maintain a secure leadership position was largely due to the abolition of the *shura*, a consultative council, and his campaign of systematic purging of dissidents and opponents. his dictatorial approach actually led to the emergence of the ISWAP faction, which sought to uphold a form of 'democracy' through the *shura*, but which still led to purges in the instance that leaders were no longer deemed adequate by all members of the advisory organ. Shekau's longevity and influence posed a significant challenge to the unity and progress of ISWAP, especially during times of intense infighting within the group. Having two groups operating in the same geographical area under the same jihad insurgency umbrella created obstacles to both sides' objectives. This situation eventually led to another leadership change, with the return of al-Barnawi, a figure who had hitherto

⁸⁵ Al-Hussaini, Bassim. 2020. "New ISWAP Boss Slays Five Rebel Leaders, Silences Clerical Tones."

Premiumtimesng.com. 2023. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/379975-new-iswap-boss-slays-five-rebel-leaders-silences-clerical-tones.html?tztc=1>.

⁸⁶ Al-Hussaini, Bassim. "New ISWAP Boss Slays Five Rebel Leaders, Silences Clerical Tones."

maintained proximity to the IS core leadership. In March 2021, according to Bukarti⁸⁷, IS decided to dissolve the *shura* and appoint al-Barnawi as the new governor. However, al-Barnawi himself clarified on May 9 in an audio message that his role was that of an interim or caretaker leader, tasked with implementing necessary reforms mandated by the core ISIS leadership.⁸⁸ IS's aim was to regain control over ISWAP by making it more efficient and eliminating the rival factions that hindered its insurgency's progress. Shekau indeed represented a major threat for ISWAP progresses and need to be eliminated according to new IS directives. As the long-time leader of Boko Haram, later renamed JAS, Shekau represented a major challenge in several ways: including criticisms of his character, his extreme ideology, his harsh leadership towards his own members, and his obstruction of the broader goal of fighting the corrupt Nigerian state and expanding *Sharia* through *jihad*. Therefore, within weeks of taking office, al-Barnawi found himself directing an operation aimed at either obtain Shekau's loyalty or eliminate him. On May 19, 2021, ISWAP, capitalized on JAS's weakened defense against Nigerian government forces and launched an offensive in the Sambisa Forest, resulting in Shekau's death. Surrounded and refusing to surrender or pledge allegiance to ISWAP, Shekau detonated an incendiary vest, resulting in his demise.

6.4 IS's role in ISWAP evolution

In analysing the crises and changes regarding ISWAP's leadership, what is relevant is to place these events in relation to the ties it has with the Islamic State, considering the influence on the emergence and evolution of ISWAP. While opinions differ on the extent of IS core's impact on ISWAP, it is undeniable that the former has played a significant

⁸⁷ Bukarti, Bulama. "IT'S a BIT TRICKY: EXPLORING ISIS'S TIES with BOKO HARAM."

⁸⁸ Zenn, Jacob. 2021. "KILLING of BOKO HARAM LEADER ABUBAKAR SHEKAU BOOSTS ISLAMIC STATE in NIGERIA." <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/TM-May-24-2021-Issue.pdf?x50264>.

role in shaping the latter. Bukarti's report examines the dynamics of ISWAP's leadership in the context of its relationship with IS. According to him, ISIS has demonstrated its relevance in matters concerning ISWAP through its involvement in the three leadership crises. He described how during the crisis with Shekau, IS acted as a mediator and provided support that had a decisive impact on the fate of the group, siding with Nur and al-Barnawi. Subsequently, the killing of Nur was carried out as a direct order from al-Baghdadi, which ISWAP leaders reluctantly executed, considering the order as binding. Eventually, the call for a stronger leader also led to the emergence of more brutal figures and the exacerbation of internal frictions that resulted in a campaign of recurrent purges. However, as already mentioned, this is an influence and not a dependence of ISWAP's action on IS-core directives.

These events can be seen also within the broader context of the status of IS core at the time. After the fall of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2017, IS placed considerable emphasis on African groups, with ISWAP being the most promising affiliate. However, the unravelling of the proclaimed Islamic State and the leadership's decline hindered IS's ability to exert greater control. This is evident in the continuous internal dissensions within ISWAP and the inability to solve them and to establish a strong and stable leadership, which instead was frequently replaced or physically eliminated. It should be noted, as Bukarti emphasizes in his analysis of the relations between IS and ISWAP that the latter should not be interpreted as a mere puppet of IS. As also argued by Warner et al., there is no evidence of significant direct material support by the Islamic State for its affiliates in Africa and thus also ISWAP, but the effects of carrying the 'Islamic State' label are tangible. Despite the influence on internal structure and tactics, ISWAP, as well as the rest of the African affiliates must primarily be understood through the lens of their local

and/or regional context⁸⁹. ISWAP indeed received influence and support from IS, but it does not operate under direct operational control. Instead, it maintains its own local objectives, even though it shares much of its ideology and some aspects of its modus operandi with IS, remains focused on its regional insurgency, receiving some sort of guidance from IS but without merging with the Islamic State's more global objectives. On the contrary, not only is ISWAP not bound by IS control, but it is also sometimes a source of inspiration for IS, as seen in its decision to consider aid workers as 'legitimate targets' starting in 2020. Although ISWAP initially received material assistance and ideological influence from IS during its early years, its existence is not solely defined by that relationship. Indeed, most scholars rule out the absolute interdependency of African affiliates on IS-core status, so much so that the period of calamities suffered in the Levant is not reflected in the African scenario, especially within ISWAP which demonstrated its ability to maintain its operational tempo⁹⁰. Rather, the relationship between ISWAP and IS-core may have initiated a process of reconfiguration of the Islamic State in Africa, with the group operating in West Africa serving as a model for the continent. Moreover, the liaison can be seen as mutually beneficial, as ISWAP's successes reflect positively on IS. For instance, as reported by a report by EXTRAC, the creation of a propaganda video by ISWAP in July 2021, and its release by IS-core as the first such release by them since 2018, represented a significant moment for both IS-core and its affiliate in West Africa. Following its territorial losses in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State now places a greater

⁸⁹Warner, Jason, Ryan O'Farrel, Héni Nsaibia, and Ryan Cummings. 2020. "Outlasting the Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State Threat in Africa – Combating Terrorism Center at West Point." *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 13 (11). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/outlasting-the-caliphate-the-evolution-of-the-islamic-state-threat-in-africa/>.

⁹⁰ Warner, Jason, Ryan O'Farrel, Héni Nsaibia, and Ryan Cummings. "Outlasting the Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State Threat in Africa – Combating Terrorism Center at West Point."

emphasis on publicizing ISWAP military triumphs evidence of the increasing traction between them⁹¹. The dissemination of that video not only highlighted the growth and development of ISWAP in the West African region, but it symbolized a moment of redemption for IS, showcasing its ability to maintain operational momentum on a global scale⁹².

7. ISWAP consolidation and expansion during its initial phase (2016-20/21)

ISWAP thus emerges soon after IS's defeats in Syria and Iraq as its most worrying extension. After a period of relative low activity between 2016 and 2017, ISWAP experienced a surge in more ambitious attacks in the autumn of 2018. By this time, ISWAP had become the largest, most powerful, and most capable faction of IS in Africa, posing the primary terrorist threat in West Africa.⁹³ The group had developed into a formidable and well-organised militant force through a combination of several external and internal factors, respectively benefiting from a breathing moment due to the Nigerian military's focus on countering the Shekau threat and displaying great flexibility in adapting to more successful strategies and tactics. This allowed ISWAP to expand in many ways, in terms of manpower, territorial control, civil support and recognition, and financial and material resources. However, in light of the aforementioned leadership-related events, the approach to more moderate strategies and tactics compared to JAS will have to be contextualized within ISWAP's broader spectrum of internal fragmentation.

⁹¹ Zenn, Jacob. 2019. "The Islamic State's Provinces on the Peripheries: Juxtaposing the Pledges from Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf and Maute Group in the Philippines." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 (2019): 87–104. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26590511>.

⁹² EXTRAC. 2021. "Daesh's West African Power GRAB: A Strategic Assessment ." *EXTRAC*. https://public-assets.extrac.io/reports/ExTrac_ISWAP_0721.pdf.

⁹³ Stoddard, Edward. "Competitive Control? 'Hearts and Minds' and the Population Control Strategy of the Islamic State West Africa Province."

Immediately after the split, ISWAP was in a phase of consolidation of its power and strategies, thus maintaining a low profile for almost all of 2016 and 2017. Stoddard defines this initial phase as a retreat and consolidation phase, or better known as strategic defence. For ISWAP, that time was necessary to organise its internal structure, thus placing itself in the northern parts of Borno and the areas around Lake Chad, where it could better protect itself from attacks by JAS and especially from the counterinsurgency air forces. Fortunately, for ISWAP, Shekau, at that time was considered the most threatening group, especially after triggering international attention with the abduction of the Chibok Girls, posing the major direct threat.

Indeed, the Nigerian forces were focused on annihilating him. ISWAP, therefore, enjoyed an auspicious start from this breathtaking moment, which allowed the consolidation of the insurgency's strategies. A change in terms of strategies and targeting, stemming mainly from the disapproval of JAS modus operandi, turned its fortunes and was instrumental to its success and expansion in several dimensions. First, the reason for breaking away from Shekau was its indiscriminate violence toward civilians from which ISWAP disassociated itself by adjusting its target selection accordingly. In fact, ISWAP focuses mainly on military targets and much less than JAS on government-related civilian targets, mass killings, and major kidnappings. This has a dual instrumentality for ISWAP. On the one hand, it reflects the ideology of the members who decided to separate from Shekau for his brutality against civilians, being also a strategic move in order to expand its capacity for territorial control and create a broader support base. Secondly, in this early phase of ISWAP's insurgency building, the targeting of mainly military bases was aimed at provisioning. As an emerging young faction, ISWAP needed more weaponry, being equipped with mostly light weapons not heavier than 14mm. The attacks during 2016-17 were mostly aimed therefore at filling that shortage of weapons, allowing ISWAP to

obtain heavier weapons, rocket-propelled grenades, and ammunition from the Nigerian Army bases they attacked. This phase therefore of preliminary and low-intensity attacks, aimed at gaining supplies, recruiting more fighters, and consolidating its power. With a greater strength of fighters, and a stock of weapons ISWAP was able to initiate a more intensive offensive campaign against government forces from 2018 onwards.

7.1 ISWAP strength-building and definition of its approach

In term of fighters, at the beginning of 2018, ISWAP increased its workforce by almost five times⁹⁴. According to estimates by the Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, ISWAP was projected to have between 3,500 and 5,000 militants in 2020, surpassing the combined number of fighters in all IS cells across Africa. Although smaller in size compared to the integrated JAS, which had 7,000 to 10,000 fighters from 2014 to 2015, the splinter faction quickly established itself as a dominant force and carried out numerous deadly attacks. According to the research by The Global Initiative For Civil Stabilisation, during 2018 hundreds of people arrived from training abroad to join ISWAP, among them the report also identifies the team that will later be responsible for the elimination of Nur. This signals, therefore, an increase in fighters from even tougher lines, who increase manpower within ISWAP but also contribute to change the direction of its approach. In addition, large numbers of fighters who left JAS also enter the ranks of ISWAP in the course of the year, weakening Shekau's faction further.

⁹⁴ The Conflict Studies And Analysis Project. 2019a. "SURVIVAL and EXPANSION: The Islamic State's West African Province." The Global Initiative For Civil Stabilisation. <https://divergentoptions.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/GICS-Survival-And-Expansion-of-the-Islamic-States-West-African-Province-Full.pdf>.

Even in terms of territorial control, ISWAP did not reach the same extent as Boko Haram during the peak of its insurgency. ISWAP had already consolidated its presence in some areas, such as those around the Alagarno Forest from the time when Nur and al-Barnawi separated from Shekau, from which they began to expand their territory, in this first phase, concentrating towards northeastern Nigeria and Lake Chad basin including areas belonging to Chad and Nigeria as well. This disrupted the territorial continuity of JAS contributing to weaken Shekau's faction, which maintained control over the southern Borno state and the Sambisa Forest as its stronghold. Shekau's faction foster ISWAP's territorial expansion in two ways, firstly by allowing it to operate almost undisturbed by the Nigerian army engaged in the fight against it in the early days, and secondly by providing important lessons learned that ISWAP has used to develop more effective strategies. Shekau was often criticized for his inability to maintain control over captured territories, particularly due to the vulnerability of these areas, being towns and capital cities, to government airstrikes. As a result, ISWAP militants recognized the need to shift their focus to rural areas and employ guerrilla tactics, rather than engaging in conventional battles. They limited their presence to the inaccessible Forests of Borno and Yobe, rural regions of Borno state, parts of the Mandara hills on the Nigeria-Cameroon border, and the marshes and islands of Lake Chad. These areas provided greater cover and protection from airstrikes. ISWAP learns from the mistakes of Shekau's insurgency that it is much riskier to aim to exert direct control over vast territories, especially large and uncovered cities. ISWAP's territorial strategy can be categorised into two types. First, ISWAP does not limit itself to the mere possession of territories but aims to consolidate its presence before expanding further. ISWAP applies a population-centric approach by identifying the population as the focus of its power and influence. In fact, first, ISWAP maintains direct control over those rural areas that offer better protection from air attacks and are easier to control. It establishes permanent bases there and governs civilian

settlements. Secondly, it exercises indirect control beyond its possessed territories, projecting its influence through road patrols, emissaries, trade facilitation, and the collection of taxes and providing security for herders. This type of strategy allowed him to exert influence over a wider section of territory and to gain the support from the local population.

ISWAP's approach towards the population again stems from criticism of Shekau's extensive interpretation of *takfir*. If for him the targets of the insurgency were to be all those who, living in territories under government control or not being part of JAS, were considered infidels, for ISWAP the concept of infidels narrows considerably. Following the ideological line also of the Islamic State, ISWAP develops a strategy to limit the targeting of civilians, large mass killings, large kidnappings and suicide attacks, especially those involving women and children, extensively present in Shekau's methods. This changes have indeed been reflected in a noticeable decrease in recorded civilian casualties compared to those up to 2016. However, it is important to note that during this period of ISWAP formation and consolidation, the tactics employed were influenced by various factors, including the aforementioned changes in leadership. Therefore, what is described as a general ISWAP tendency, to prefer military targets while avoiding civilian casualties, was not always reflected in all of the group's actual actions during this period. In fact, the type of approach pursued by ISWAP must be contextualised to the type of leadership present. Changes in leadership coincided with changes in ISWAP's tactics and strategies. Thus, some exceptions to ISWAP's general course of action have been observed, particularly in relation to kidnappings and attacks against Muslim women in south-east Niger. This is the case, for example, in the periods when figures who were halfway between the more moderate approach of al-Barnawi and Nur and the more violent approach of Shekau, such as Ba idrissa and Ba Lawan, held the leadership role. A report

published by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, analysing the surge in female abductions in south-east Niger, finds ISWAP's responsibility unlikely and gives three different explanations⁹⁵. The first attributes the emergence of a sub-faction to the responsibility for the attacks carried out in a border area between ISWAP and JAS. In fact, the overlapping operations in the same territories at that time of different factions and sub-factions complicates the attribution of responsibility for the attacks. Considering ISWAP's approach to be too moderate, the Bakura faction broke away from the group and in 2019 gave its allegiance to Shekau, thus making it plausible to pursue a more JAS-like line, in the territories, however, bordering between the two⁹⁶. Another explanation the research by Pearson and Zenn gives for the increase in abductions of Muslim women is related precisely to changes in leadership. This is because, as previously illustrated, the alternation of different personalities in leadership was obviously reflected in the group's tactics and strategies. Even though ISWAP's existential motive stems from not sharing Shekau's brutal methods, leaders such as Ba Idrissa or Ba Lawan have nevertheless represented more hawkish figures. Ba Idrissa, as reported by al-Hussaini, was in fact removed for his attempt to preserve certain ideals handed down by Shekau, including the doctrine of *takfir*, motives that had caused ISWAP to split from him and thus in extreme contrast to the general will of the fighters⁹⁷. Indeed, the research recognizes the coincidence of the change of leadership in March 2019, when Ba Idrissa was appointed, with the increase of abductions of civilians including Muslim women in southeastern Niger. Corroborating this, Zenn's article reports several attacks during the same period

⁹⁵ Pearson, Elizabeth, and Jacob Zenn. 2021. "Understanding Niger, Gender, and Evolving Jihadist Allegiances." International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep29499.8.pdf>.

⁹⁶Inoua, Maman, Elhadji Amadou, and Vincent Foucher. 2022. "Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin: The Bakura Faction and Its Resistance to the Rationalisation of Jihad." https://www.swp-berlin.org/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA_PB_Foucher_ElHadji_Bakura_EN.pdf.

⁹⁷ Al-Hussaini, Bassim. "ISWAP, Terror Group in Nigeria, Rebrands, Reversing Tradition."

considered unusual for the group⁹⁸. The author reported several abductions of women in the areas of Diffa and Bosso mainly, attacks on several villages and the killings of civilians among others, an action from which ISWAP under al-Barnawi would generally refrain. Among the most notable perhaps is the attack with the use of suicide bombers in N'guigmi, north of Diffa resulting in the killing of 14 people. This last attack, having taken place 100 km farther north than Diffa, is also generally regarded as an expansion of ISWAP over territories it had never reached before, extending farther north into Niger. According to Pearson and Zenn, therefore, changes in leadership could provide an explanation for the growing influence of abduction tactics in ISWAP, as well as the territorial expansion of the group⁹⁹. This may have given rise to a Shekau-like path within ISWAP that may also have fostered collaboration with the Bakura faction in these operations. Zenn also identified that the attacks around Lake Chad in Niger and Chad at the time reflected a similar trajectory to Shekau's modus operandi in contrast to ISWAP trends in general. But the failure to claim responsibility of some attacks also showed the resistance of some ISWAP members to the ruling leadership and thus an internal rift. Zenn stated that there is a possibility that the waves of abductions in Niger may have been carried out by factions favourable to Shekau or defiant of Ba Idrissa¹⁰⁰. Hence, this type of attack should be seen as an exception, albeit not an isolated one, to ISWAP's more general course of action. This is thus reflected in the third and final hypothesis elaborated by Pearson and Zenn, according to which some ISWAP members acted somewhat

⁹⁸Zenn, Jacob. 2019. "Boko Haram Factionalization: Who Are Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) Fighters in Niger and Chad?" *Jamestown*, June 14, 2019. <https://jamestown.org/program/boko-haram-factionalization-who-are-islamic-state-in-west-africa-province-iswap-fighters-in-niger-and-chad/>.

⁹⁹Pearson, Elizabeth, and Jacob Zenn. 2021. "Understanding Niger, Gender, and Evolving Jihadist Allegiances." International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep29499.8.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰Zenn, Jacob. "Boko Haram Factionalization: Who Are Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) Fighters in Niger and Chad?"

independently, even outside the leadership. Which might also clarify why these types of kidnappings were not publicized by ISWAP itself, as well as IS. All this is to say that the internal fragmentations, hence the leadership changes, were also reflected in ISWAP's strategic behaviour that was not always consistent with what the group had stated.

Defining with certainty which of these hypotheses is the predominant explanation for ISWAP's use of hardline tactics is complex, but all of them must be taken into account as plausible. Thus, the reality of things is more likely to be a mix of the aforementioned hypotheses. The theory that emerges with consistency is the belief that ISWAP as a whole does not support these types of tactics. Rather, these have emerged from some hardliner members, or from leaders who, for reasons already mentioned, have taken control by trying to steer the group towards a more violent line, or from sporadic actions forced by rivalry with other factions.

7.2 ISWAP outside Nigeria

The above assumptions can also be considered when analysing ISWAP's projection beyond the region. In fact, the increase in attacks outside Nigeria is due to different leaderships, clashes with rival factions and the need to establish itself as a regional force outside Nigeria. While ISWAP has always maintained an active presence in the areas along the Nigerian shoreline with the Lake Chad, border towns with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, it has now demonstrated the ability to project power beyond these territories. The previously mentioned attack at 100 km further into Niger state is a clear example of the extension beyond the usually attacked border towns including Diffa, Maine-Soroa and Toumour¹⁰¹. According to a report by Akum, Alio, and Bako, since January 2019 over 60

¹⁰¹Zenn, Jacob. "Boko Haram Factionalization: Who Are Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) Fighters in Niger and Chad?" and Pinaud, Margaux. 2019a. "Regional Overview - Africa 19 March 2019." ACLED. March 19, 2019. <https://acleddata.com/2019/03/19/regional-overview-africa-19-march-2019/>.

attacks were recorded inside Niger linked this surge in attacks, comprised of an attack toward a humanitarian organization in April, to the recent change in leadership.¹⁰² The report also highlights that the chaotic internal dimension is not affecting the operational capabilities of the group, which indeed shows a proliferation in attacks around the Lake Chad basin countries. As for the extension into Chad, the same dynamic was replicated. In general, the territories where ISWAP used to operate were limited to the area around Lake Chad, Ngouboua and Kaiga Kindjiri, whereas in 2019, an attack was recorded in the village of Bol, which resulted in the killing of the sultan, expanding ISWAP's operations to northern Chad as well¹⁰³. In 2019, Crisis Group reported attacks in Cameroon, in the district of Logone-et-Chari, targeting Cameroonian security forces. According to Zenn however, some of these attacks in unusual areas were not claimed by ISWAP, showing, as stated before, a weak line of command and control, as they were likely carried out by sub-factions outside the control of the leadership¹⁰⁴.

7.3 ISWAP strategies and tactics

ISWAP's military strategy is rooted in guerrilla warfare, characterized by ambushes, shelling, and hit-and-run attacks, initially targeting military barracks in rural areas of Borno where the group could boast an asymmetric advantage. Thus, ambushes were carried out on Nigerian army supply convoys with the aim of procure supplies and steal them from the targeted soldiers. The years 2016 and 2017 were instrumental in adapting

¹⁰² Akum, Fonthe, Iilliassou Abdoulaye Alio, and Habibou Souley Bako. 2019. "What Doesn't Break Boko Haram in Niger Makes It Stronger." ISS Africa. May 28, 2019. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/what-doesnt-break-boko-haram-in-niger-makes-it-stronger>.

¹⁰³ International Crisis Group. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province."

¹⁰⁴ Zenn, Jacob. "Boko Haram Factionalization: Who Are Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) Fighters in Niger and Chad?"

tactics and gaining experience by attacking smaller military targets¹⁰⁵. These probing attacks, as cited by the report, could last for days or even weeks in order to wear down soldiers' morale as much as possible and to test the Nigerian Air Force's response time in providing support on the ground. After a period of increasing professionalism and these probing attacks, ISWAP embarked on a more intensive offensive in 2018 that showed its capabilities and abilities to conduct more complex, large-scale, and deadly attacks¹⁰⁶. ISWAP's 2018 attacks aimed to eliminate the rival military presence and divert government forces from their controlled territories, allowing for increased influence and operational mobility in a wider area. With this began a campaign that saw several military bases targeted, with the aim, however, not to hold conquered territories but to loot the camp and leave. According to a report published on 2019, ISWAP claimed more than 20 attacks on military bases since mid-2018. Probably the first of which was the raid of a camp in Jilli, Yobe state, in July 2018, that demonstrated a good ability of ISWAP to target vulnerable targets and thus proved the group owned reliable intelligence, as it was considered a more vulnerable target given the presence of more inexperienced soldiers¹⁰⁷. In September of the same year, ISWAP overran the city of Gudumbali, the first time a local government headquarters was seized¹⁰⁸. Another attack resulted to be the bloodiest on, in Metele ISWAP killed over 100 soldiers¹⁰⁹. Subsequently, a major success for ISWAP was the overrun of the Nigerian military base in Baga in December 2018, which led to the taking over of the town of Doro Gowon as well, resulting in the evacuation of

¹⁰⁵ The Conflict Studies And Analysis Project. "SURVIVAL and EXPANSION: The Islamic State's West African Province."

¹⁰⁶ The Conflict Studies And Analysis Project. "SURVIVAL and EXPANSION: The Islamic State's West African Province."

¹⁰⁷ International Crisis Group. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province."

¹⁰⁸ International Crisis Group. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province."

¹⁰⁹ Shaban , Abdur Rahman Alfa. 2018. "Nigeria Lost 39 Troops in Boko Haram Attack, Not 118 – Army." Africanews. 2018. <https://www.africanews.com/2018/11/29/nigeria-lost-39-troops-in-boko-haram-attack-not-118-army/>.

the military forces¹¹⁰. The capture of the Baga base, the former headquarters of the MNJTF, is symbolic because it demonstrates a level of strength by the militants not seen in 5 years, the last time such a base was taken by Boko Haram forces. Moreover, the first attack in Baga is to be remembered as a moment which signed the building of a regional Islamic State in Africa, as it define geographically the caliphate and signed the emergence of Abu Musab al-Barnawi as the new spokesman of Boko Haram. Al-Barnawi in this occasion specified the mission of the group, which shouldn't be confused with the mere prohibition of foreign school and democracy but intended to be the creation of a governance of Allah in the land¹¹¹. The group continued to attack military bases in the town of Gajiram, Borno State, the 158 Task Force battalion at the village of Kareto, Borno State, the Buni and Yadi military base, in Yobe state, the military outposts near Bulabulin village in the Konduga area of Borno among others¹¹². According to data reported by ACLED, between August 2018 and March 2019, the largest number of armed clashes between ISWAP and the Nigerian military was recorded, but with no territorial losses on either side¹¹³. This reflects the aforementioned strategic defence strategy, in line with traditional revolutionary warfare, which at this early stage involves attrition of the adversary rather than an attempt to hold territory. In fact, ISWAP holds the attacked territory for a limited amount of time and then abandons it once it has been supplied with

¹¹⁰ Maclean, Ruth. 2018. "Boko Haram Launches Series of Attacks in North-East Nigeria." *The Guardian*. The Guardian. December 28, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/28/boko-haram-launches-series-of-attacks-in-north-east-nigeria>.

¹¹¹ Tochukwu Omena, J., Ifeanyichukwu M. Abada, and Z. Onyinyechi Omenma. "Boko Haram Insurgency: A Decade of Dynamic Evolution and Struggle for a Caliphate."

¹¹² Kelly, Fergus. 2019. "Islamic State Attacks Nigeria Military Base in Kareto, Killing Commander." *The Defense Post*. June 14, 2019. <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/06/14/nigeria-islamic-state-attack-kareto-borno-iswap/>.

¹¹³ Pinaud, Margaux. 2019. "Regional Overview - Africa 16 April 2019." ACLED. April 16, 2019. <https://acleddata.com/2019/04/16/regional-overview-africa-16-april-2019/>.

food or material supply for example. This also represents ISWAP's most current approach to territory¹¹⁴. ISWAP redefined its approach to the possibility of holding on to territories, the tactic to target security forces aimed to deplete them and divert their attention from the territories ISWAP controls, in order to increase its influence and mobility capability as well as operability in a wider area¹¹⁵. This intense campaign of large and small-scale battles in the framework of guerrilla tactics led ISWAP to expel the military from many towns such as Baga, Doron-Baga, Kross, Metele, Kawwa, Bunduran, Kekeno and Kukawa, extending its influence into central Borno of Talala and Magumeri¹¹⁶, in Yobe state of Buni-Yadi, south in the Alagarno and Ajigin forest, and Kareto, Geidam and Mainok communities. Outside Nigeria, it consolidated its control over Diffa section in Niger, the Lac region in Chad and the Logone-et-Chari department of Cameroon.

7.4 Government forces response to ISWAP growing threat

ISWAP took advantage of the time between 2017 and 2018 to establish itself as the dominant force, demonstrating to government forces its increasing ability to strike multiple military bases in increasing degrees and more frequently. The Nigerian forces were coming from a phase of extreme effort to eliminate the JAS presence from Sambisa Forest and generally annihilate Shekau. Distracted, therefore, by what appeared to be the main threat, they left room for ISWAP to organise more and more attacks through which they accumulated more and more weapons and technical sophistication. As a result, the forces of the Lake Chad Basin countries met in N'Djamena in late 2018 to discuss the need for a new counter-offensive strategy. The strategy was reminiscent of the 2015

¹¹⁴ Stoddard. "Revolutionary Warfare? Assessing the Character of Competing Factions within the Boko Haram Insurgency."

¹¹⁵ Tochukwu Omena, J., Ifeanyichukwu M. Abada, and Z. Onyinyechi Omenma. "Boko Haram Insurgency: A Decade of Dynamic Evolution and Struggle for a Caliphate."

¹¹⁶ Abubakar, Uthman, Hamza Idris, and Ronald Mutum. 2018. "Boko Haram Seizes 6 Borno Towns - Daily Trust." Dailytrust.com. December 2018. <https://dailytrust.com/boko-haram-seizes-6-borno-towns/>.

'garrison town' project. General Olusegun Adeniyi, who assumed the role of Nigerian army's theatre commander for operations in Borno in August 2019, introduced the 'super camp' strategy¹¹⁷. The concept behind super camps was to concentrate troops and resources in well-defined strongholds, enabling more effective control of territory and a more agile response to insurgent attacks. The aim was to concentrate forces in a smaller number of locations in order to better defend and have mobile units that could be deployed more effectively, but above all to prevent attacks on military bases by ISWAP that were creating attrition of manpower and equipment¹¹⁸. The idea echoes a strategy already used in 2015 that consisted in the fortification of towns and the forceful displacement of people from rural areas to these 'garrison towns' into what have become known as IDF camps for displaced people. However, there is a lot of debate regarding this type of strategy both from a humanitarian point of view and also because it's not seen as strategically successful choice¹¹⁹. While this may have decreased military casualties and theft of material resources, it has also depleted the army's ability to fight ISWAP by leaving them free in rural areas, able to move along major uncontrolled roads and also leaving uncovered that part of the population not relocated in the super camps. This to a certain extent preserves those civilian deaths resulting from clashes between ISWAP and the military, but it also demonstrates a loss of control on the part of the police and respectively the state, which leaves segments of the population under the influence of ISWAP. The governor of Borno was the first opponent of this strategy, criticising it for being incapable

Foucher, Vincent . 2020. "The Jihadi Proto-State in the Lake Chad Basin." ISPI. March 2020.

<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/jihadi-proto-state-lake-chad-basin-25441>.

¹¹⁸Abdullahi, Murtala. 2021. "Another Look at Nigeria's Super Camp Strategy Two Years After." HumAngle. May 3, 2021. <https://humanglemedia.com/another-look-at-nigerias-super-camp-strategy-two-years-after/>.

¹¹⁹Zenn, Jacob. 2019. "The Humanitarian Dilemma around the Military's 'Super Camp' Strategy in Nigeria." Council on Foreign Relations. 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/humanitarian-dilemma-around-militarys-super-camp-strategy-nigeria>.

of diminishing attacks, but rather leaving large rural areas uncovered, transit roads unguarded. For this reason, the governor made extensive use of vigilantism, emphasising a lack of state security apparatus. With fewer outposts to attack and fortified towns difficult to overrun, ISWAP was slowed somewhat in 2020 by this new strategy. It did not take long, however, for them to begin a series of attacks on these super camps, hitting Askira, Dikwa, Marte, Damasak, Geidam, Katarko, Ngagam, Kanama, Bulabulin and Mainok in 2021¹²⁰. What predominantly emerged from the super camp strategy is a growing mistrust of the population towards the military, who seem to be more and more interested in protecting the military bases rather than the civilian population. This can only work in favour of the insurgents. Indeed, with the military confined to the fortified cities, they have done nothing but expand into the rural areas, gaining territorial and political ground through the employment of their population-centric approach exploiting the disillusionment of a large civilian population with the state security apparatus.

8. The death of Shekau and the consequences on ISWAP expansion

Shekau's death represents the culmination of years of rivalry and clashes between two different currents of thought, necessary to ensure the advancement of the ISWAP insurgency. Sources reported to the Institute of Security Studies that the Islamic State, warning ISWAP that its position on the islands of Lake Chad would make significant expansion difficult, suggested, the need to conquer better locations such as the Sambisa Forest, Shekau's stronghold and hideout, thus demanding his elimination¹²¹. From this

¹²⁰Zenn, Jacob. 2021. "ISWAP Launches Hearts and Minds Strategy to Counter Nigerian Army Offensive." Jamestown. June 2021. <https://jamestown.org/program/iswap-launches-hearts-and-minds-strategy-to-counter-nigerian-army-offensive/>.

¹²¹ Samuel, Malik. ed. 2021. "Islamic State's Determined Expansion into Lake Chad Basin." ISS Africa. August 3, 2021. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/islamic-states-determined-expansion-into-lake-chad-basin>.

point of view, the year 2021 represents a turning point, marked by the willingness to bring about reforms that would promote the strengthening of ISWAP's internal structure accompanied, however, by operations that would break down external challenges. Hence, the Sambisa offensive produced several different consequences. First, the death of Shekau allowed ISWAP to expand its territorial control and gain considerable operational advantages, subsequently, it also brought a good portion of ex-JAS fighters into the ranks of ISWAP, increasing the group's numbers, and finally given Shekau's obsession with stockpiling weapons for his security, ISWAP inherited a large amount of material resources including weapons and ammunition¹²².

On the territorial level, the aim of Shekau's elimination was to ensure ISWAP's territorial extension not only into the northeast areas of Nigeria but into the broader Lake Chad area. Before his death, Shekau's group extended its control to the southern and central areas of Borno state, northern and central Adamawa state, and northern and far northern Cameroon. ISWAP, on the other hand, predominated in the northern part of Borno state along the border with Chad and Niger.¹²³ It has to be said, however, that there have never been clear demarcation lines of the territories under the influence of one or the other side, as they have always been a battleground between the two. According to a Crisis Group report (2019), the demarcation line seemed to run through the Mafa, Dikwa and Kala Balge local government areas, northeast Nigeria.¹²⁴ However, the 2021 offensive, which seized the Sambisa Forest, a JAS stronghold, sharply reconfigured the territorial assets of the two groups allowing ISWAP to take grip on new rural areas in central Nigeria and

¹²² Salkida, Ahmad. 2021. "What Shekau's Death Means for Security in Nigeria, Lake Chad." HumAngle. May 21, 2021. <https://humanglemedia.com/what-shekaus-death-means-for-security-in-nigeria-lake-chad/>.

¹²³ UNDP. 2020. "Conflict Analysis in the Lake Chad Basin."

¹²⁴ International Crisis Group. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province."

southern Borno state while consolidating its already presence in rural north of Borno¹²⁵. The capture of the Sambisa Forest not only had the symbolic significance, of defeating the enemy but also represented an important strategic advantage for ISWAP. In fact, this territory gave ISWAP not only the opportunity to have an additional point from which to direct its operations but the possibility of doing so more safely, thanks to greater cover from Nigerian army air raids than, for example, the desert areas around the Lake Chad basin. Not only that, but the conquest of the Sambisa Forest also means bringing the insurgency 60 km from Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, thanks to access to the main roads leading there. But also, this gives it easy access to the southernmost part of Borno through Taraba and Cross River and to the northwest area through Bauchi and Jigawa.¹²⁶ Although ISWAP maintained a lower profile in the weeks following the attack, by mid-June it could already boast control of many of the former JAS territories, expanding its sphere of influence. These included the nearby southern Borno, Alagarno Forest, in Damboa local government area, islands and coastline in the southern part of Lake Chad, the Gwoza hills, part of the Mandara mountains on the Cameroon-Niger border line, and the Timbuktu area. This also marked the beginning of a period of increased aggression in ISWAP attacks. As a consequence of this expansion and strength in power, ISWAP activity recorded outside Nigerian borders also increased from that moment onwards. Never-before-affected territories fell under the crosshairs, such as the border towns with Niger, Mallam Fatori, and Bosso¹²⁷.

¹²⁵ International Crisis Group. 2022. "After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria's North East." March 29, 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/after-shekau-confronting-jihadists-nigerias-north-east>.

¹²⁶ Salkida, Ahmad. "What Shekau's Death Means for Security in Nigeria, Lake Chad."

¹²⁷ Jacob, Zenn. 2021a. "Target Maiduguri: How Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP)'S Ramadan Offensive Will Counter Operation Tura Takai Bango." *Jamestown*, April 2021. <https://jamestown.org/program/target-maiduguri-how-islamic-state-in-west-africa-province-iswaps-ramadan-offensive-will-counter-operation-tura-takai-bango/>.

Shekau's death confirms ISWAP's supremacy in terms of numbers as immediately after the attack, ISWAP moved to enlist as many JAS soldiers as possible. According to a Crisis Group report, eighteen of those in the Sambisa Forest immediately joined the ranks of ISWAP¹²⁸. This was followed in late June by an audio in which al-Barnawi called out Shekau's followers, later witnessed by a video in which his followers swore allegiance to ISWAP. But although this was promoted as a victory by IS and ISWAP's media team, the attempt to mobilise former JAS fighters under the control of the new predominant group obtained little success¹²⁹. Indeed, part of the former JAS combatants would not surrender to ISWAP control, leading the latter to employ a more forceful approach to reintegration¹³⁰. Therefore, the recorded influx of new fighters joining ISWAP could not only have come from former JAS members but stemmed mainly from a movement recorded by research conducted by the Institute for Security Studies, that saw at least 130 fighters from Libya return to the Lake Chad region between April and June. The support of these militants facilitated the attack in the Sambisa Forest, but continued thereafter, prompted by the reform of members' welfare provision and commanders' accountability, with regular inflows to assist ISWAP in its fight against JAS¹³¹. However, this increase in violence led to even more fierce confrontations between rival parties and several pro-JAS factions maintained their loyalty to Shekau opposing ISWAP. Among them for example the Bakura group led by Ibrahim Bakura Dorono, but also other smaller factions. Many others had already chosen to negotiate a way out with the Nigerian authorities, but this situation of exacerbated hostility between the two factions has increased the number of defections. As a result, there was a mass exodus from the region in 2021, according to the

¹²⁸International Crisis Group. "After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria's North East."

¹²⁹Foucher, Vincent. 2021. "Last Words of Abubakar Shekau: A Testament in the Politics of Jihadi Extraversion." *Sources. Materials & Fieldwork in African Studies*, no. 3 (December): 1–27. <https://www.sources-journal.org/684>.

¹³⁰ UNDP. "Conflict Analysis in the Lake Chad Basin."

¹³¹ Samuel, Malik. "Islamic State's Determined Expansion into Lake Chad Basin."

UNDP report, which was also confirmed by the estimates presented in the Crisis Groups one, according to which 2,000 JAS fighters surrendered themselves to the authorities along with approximately 30,000 civilians who fled the area¹³². Within ISWAP, however, the reforms enacted sought to function as a recruiting tool, securing their loyalty. In fact, measures aimed at satisfying ISWAP members ensured that they were treated fairly by commanders and that they could choose what to do with their spoils of war, relying on the economic incentive for recruitment¹³³. This led to a rejoining process during the first half of 2022, where 80% of those fighters who left the insurgency during the Sambisa Forest attack, came back to Nigeria¹³⁴.

8.1 IS promotion of reforms to structure ISWAP

As mentioned earlier, the killing of Shekau is part of a broader plan to reform ISWAP, promoted by IS-core. Despite the fact that ISWAP and JAS were involved in a bloody battle for control of the Lake Chad region, ISWAP members did not contemplate Shekau's death until it was given as an order by ISIS. The decision at the beginning of the year to disband the *shura* and name al-Barnawi as the new leader were in fact temporary measures aimed at accomplishing the mission. In fact, once the operation was completed, with greater territorial control, more material resources, and a numerical growth of fighters, IS core was able to impose its ideas on how to consolidate ISWAP's power in the region and consequently its own. IS's proposal was to divide the areas under their control into four new caliphates, each ruled by a *wali*. The figure of a single *wali* is thus abolished, who is now no longer the leader at the head of the internal organisation, but rather a figure commanding his own area of influence. As reported by a research by the Institute for Security Studies in July 2021, the new organisational structure of ISWAP is divided as

¹³² UNDP. "Conflict Analysis in the Lake Chad Basin."

¹³³ International Crisis Group. "After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria's North East."

¹³⁴ Barkindo, Atta. "Boko Haram-ISWAP and the Growing Footprint of Islamic State (IS) in Africa."

follows: the four new states represent the Lake Chad area, Sambisa, Timbuktu and Tumbuma, the latter under the control of Ba Lawan. The governors answer to two distinct figures above them, one is that of the head of the *Shura*, a position that was assigned to al-Barnawi, while the other is the chief military commander or *Amirul Jaish*, held by Sa'ad who pending the designation of the *wali* of the Lake Chad area also oversaw this one. Each caliphate is represented by two members within the shura council and has its own military commanders, although the Amirul Jaish will be the reference body for the military activities of the region as a whole. At the apex of this pyramid was IS-core leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, who controlled all four caliphates until his death.¹³⁵ The appointment of figures is also strictly under the influence of IS core, which has to accept and recognize the proposals made by ISWAP leaders.

8.2 ISWAP as the new epicentre of Salafi-jihadi violence

The result of these reforms and changes is evident in both ISWAP's military and political achievements in the months following Shekau's death. In early 2022, IS claimed more operations in Nigeria than in Iraq, showing how ISWAP has become the new epicentre of Islamic State activities. This has in some ways made ISWAP more internationally minded compared to Boko Haram, given the increasing expansion of attacks outside Nigeria's north-east and in the ability to perpetrate new, more impactful attacks. This trend continued throughout 2022. Above all, ISWAP has shown great adaptability in developing new techniques, thanks in part to the help of IS advisors who have resulted in the use as early as 2018 of up-armoured SVBIEDs¹³⁶. At the end of 2022, this technique was exported for the first time outside the Northeast of Nigeria, representing the first attack in the Federal Capital Territory. ISWAP's ambition and increased sophistication in

¹³⁵Barkindo, Atta. "Boko Haram-ISWAP and the Growing Footprint of Islamic State (IS) in Africa."

¹³⁶ Kaaman, Hugo. 2021. "Transplanted Armour: The Franken-SVBIEDs of the Islamic State." January 18, 2021.

<https://hugokaaman.com/transplanted-armour-the-franken-svbieds-of-the-islamic-state/>.

capabilities materialised in December 2022 in an attempted assassination of the Nigerian president, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari in Kogi state, central Nigeria through the detonation of a VBIED¹³⁷. In 2022, it became obvious that ISWAP had established several cells in other parts of Nigeria, extending its operation capacity, outside its own safe havens. Attacks in at least 10 different states were attributed to ISWAP in 2022¹³⁸. Thus, 2022 saw a strong territorial expansion in terms of the territories attacked and the development of operational cells in different parts of Nigeria, also the attacks were more ambitious hitting or attempting to hit higher value targets, this was also due to the increased professionalism and sophistication of ISWAP's techniques and capabilities. More recently, however, ISWAP appears to be under great pressure from both rival groups and Nigerian government forces. According to Karr, since early 2023, the Boko Haram Bakura faction has launched several offensives against ISWAP, posing the greatest threat to the group, which has been operating almost undisturbed since Shekau's death¹³⁹. Because of these clashes, ISWAP lost some of its safe havens and had to retreat to the more protected area of the Sambisa Forest. This did not stop ISWAP from threatening attacks on the February 2022 polls, nor from extending and increasing the number of attacks conducted during the spring¹⁴⁰. This also provoked an increased counter-offensive by the Nigerian Army, which however remains in the tradition of increased operations in the run-up to the rainy season in July. The May report by Carter et al. speaks of a likely

¹³⁷ Karr, Liam. 2023. "Africa File: Islamic State Affiliate Attempts to Assassinate Nigerian President." *Critical Threats*. January 2023. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/africa-file/africa-file-islamic-state-affiliate-attempts-to-assassinate-nigerian-president>.

¹³⁸ Peace and Security Council . 2022. "Tackling Lake Chad's Growing Crime and Terror Threat." *ISS Africa*. October 2022. <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/tackling-lake-chads-growing-crime-and-terror-threat>.

¹³⁹ Karr, Liam. "Africa File: Islamic State Affiliate Attempts to Assassinate Nigerian President."

¹⁴⁰ Karr, Liam , Peter Mills, Brian Carter, and Kathryn Tyson. 2023. "Institute for the Study of War." *Institute for the Study of War*. Winter 2023. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-february-22-2023>.

temporary weakening of ISWAP given the threats it faces on two fronts, that coming from the rival Salafi-jihadi faction and that of government forces. In return, there is likely to be an expansion of the geographical scope of ISWAP's attacks as a typical defensive strategy¹⁴¹. In conclusion, the authors do not foresee an overwhelming reconfiguration of ISWAP, which for now remains the faction with the strongest position posing the greatest threat in the region.

9. ISWAP conquering the population's hearts and minds

However, perhaps more significant than ISWAP's military achievements is its political success, as at this time of consolidation, ISWAP began an intensive campaign to generate support among the local population. This strategy, identified in the pursuit of the population-centric approach, manifests itself in several areas. Therefore, ISWAP is now capable of posing a growing threat, but above all a more resilient one, due to the way it is being integrated within communities. From a first point of view, the technological and technical advancement is of great relevance both for the impact on the type of combat and the types of attacks that can be launched by ISWAP, but also for the extensive use of the media as a method of propaganda, which is also functional in winning the hearts and minds of the population. In addition, ISWAP has created an economic and commercial system that is fundamental to its livelihood, but above all attractive to the local population, which, due to counterinsurgency efforts, has often found itself restricted in the exercise of its commercial activities. The result of this is also the growing state of insecurity in these areas threatened both by violent extremist groups, government forces,

¹⁴¹ Carter, Brian , Liam Karr, Kathryn Tyson, and Peter Mills. 2023. "Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, May 17, 2023." Critical Threats. May 2023. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-may-17-2023>.

and common criminality, to which ISWAP acts as protector and guarantor of security. Furthermore, ISWAP has imposed a judicial and moral system based on Sharia law that regulates life in the controlled territories. Finally, it has provided a number of public services, which the local population needs and which the state has always struggled to guarantee.

9.1 Tech advancement and usage

In terms of technological modernity, ISWAP is progressing a lot so far. Statements such as those of Bukarti, a senior fellow at Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, bring to attention recent worrying developments concerning the use of the internet and the use of technology¹⁴². Access to the internet is crucial for various aspects be it communication, organisation, propaganda, etc. How this resource is exploited is also very important to ensure its effectiveness. While it used to take ISWAP hours to reach large cities like Maiduguri and just as long to find a connection, recent intelligence shows that the group has made progress in this respect. As also exposed by a report published by Institute for Security Studies, in recent months ISWAP appears to have gained access to Thuraya Wi-fi, a high-speed satellite internet service. ISWAP's monthly expenditure for this service, which they buy from Lagos and Chad, amounts to US \$6,000¹⁴³. This allows them to rely on a much more secure and faster internet connection even in the most remote areas of the Lake Chad Region. The relevance of this is that the group is able to disseminate information and receive it much more quickly. The initial technological advancement of ISWAP partly reflects the closeness to the Islamic State. Since they were still under Boko Haram in 2010/15 much has changed. Both because of obvious progress on a

¹⁴²Aworinde, Oluwatobi. 2023. "ISWAP's High-Speed Internet Access, Experiment with Drones Worrisome – Bukarti." *ChannelsTV*, June 2023.

¹⁴³Samuel, Malik. 2023. "ISWAP's Use of Tech Could Prolong Lake Chad Basin Violence." ISS Africa. April 13, 2023. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/iswaps-use-of-tech-could-prolong-lake-chad-basin-violence>.

broader level and because of the help the pledge of allegiance to IS brought within the group. Indeed, before the oath of allegiance, scholars wondered what the methods of communication between Boko Haram and IS core were, how the two sides had come into contact. A series of interviews conducted by Crisis Group confirms that ‘substantial internet-based communication’ has been ongoing since 2015. But it also emerges that at the time Boko Haram lacked a stable connection and that therefore probably the use by the group of technology was still limited. In this sense, it would seem that ISIS has introduced messaging apps like Telegram to Boko Haram’s leadership, instead of using WhatsApp, which is more difficult to encrypt and therefore less secure as a means of communication. As by Crisis Group since then, the leaders of the two groups have undertaken more intense online communication. As a result, since then, the leaders of the two groups have undertaken more intense online communication. As well as stated by Zenn in his research, the relationship between IS core and ISWAP has been in subsequent times mainly virtual¹⁴⁴. The main interlocutors of these conversations were recognised to be on the one hand Mohammad al-Adnani as chief of the external operation of ISIS and by Shekau and some members of the shura on the other. This communication channel has had various purposes beyond the exchange of doctrines and views. Through the exchange of audio, photos, videos and documents, ISWAP would have learned a lot from ISIS in various fields, including the assembly and disassembly of drones. According to Crisis Group, in 2014 ISWAP contacted ISIS by sending a photo of a piece of equipment seized after an attack. The latter would have explained it was a drone attaching a video with instructions for assembling and using it. It was at this time that ISWAP began using drones for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). The use of drones in this sense represented a form of intelligence collection, surveillance

¹⁴⁴ Zenn, Jacob. 2019. “The Islamic State’s Provinces on the Peripheries: Juxtaposing the Pledges from Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf and Maute Group in the Philippines.” *Source: Perspectives on Terrorism* 13 (1). https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26590511.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A0ea47b3e4155419433f59db0948b8966&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1.

and reconnaissance for ISWAP, as well as help in carrying out an attack. As reported by Dass in July 2022, ISWAP sent a drone over a military convoy in the city of Gubio before attacking it.¹⁴⁵ What represents a source of novelty in the technological field is the weaponization and adaptation of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). This technological improvement in the use of drones is a step forward for ISWAP, bringing an even higher level of concern for the type of threat it could pose from now on. According to a study by the Institute for Security Studies dated April 2023, ISWAP is close to using drones to carry explosive devices to conduct attacks. Technological enhancement represents a new trend for ISWAP's operational strategy and certainly provides the group with an increased destructive capability. The experimentation carried out in recent months by ISWAP consists in evaluating the weight that can be carried, the distances that can be covered, and how much autonomy these devices have. The use of drones is not new, its weaponry is, as ISWAP had already adopted ISIS-style use of drones for propaganda, surveillance, and communication purposes. The decision to switch to this type of strategy would seem to be given by the situation of great pressure posed by both the counter-insurgency of the Nigerian government forces and the clashes with rival terrorist groups. ISWAP's operational space would appear to have diminished, and the heavy defeats inflicted would seem to have forced the group to change strategy.

9.2 Propaganda to gain popular support

Another more usual use of drone technology for ISWAP relates to the aspect of propaganda. Drones then serve as a means to witness an attack and spread it online to claim it. For this purpose, the media unit, currently managed by Abba Yusuf, follows ISWAP fighters during their attacks at due range, and if these operations prove successful, they enter the field with cameras to take photos and videos. This material is then sent to the Islamic State, which takes care of

¹⁴⁵ Dass, Rueben. 2023. "The Evolving Threat from Terrorist Drones in Africa." Lawfare. April 30, 2023. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/evolving-threat-terrorist-drones-africa>.

the editing part, if one can call it that, turning it into propaganda material. At that point it goes back to the ISWAP media team which disseminates it online, mainly on Telegram, on Nashir News Agency. In addition to this, the use of drones aims to produce video propaganda that can serve as a recruitment tool. Videos of lush land, well-filled markets, fit livestock and happy and satisfied people of their lives under ISWAP protection have been spread in displaced person camps with the aim of attracting as many people as possible. Not only is the prospect of a better life with ISWAP, compared to for example displaced persons camps, an incentive for recruitment, but also the symbolism that the use of drones represents. Seen as a symbol of airpower, status and technological excellence, it gives ISWAP a sense of superiority and strength that can attract new fighters.

ISWAP has proven to be capable of making effective use of propaganda and technological advancements can only make this means of winning people's hearts and minds more and more successful. It is also evident from the management of the media that ISWAP's efforts are directed towards the civilian population. According to Garofalo, one of the most important media productions was a video released by IS official in June 2022 of about 40 minutes in which the narration was conducted in the Hausa language, demonstrating how this message was addressed to a local audience¹⁴⁶. What is generally sought to be shown through these videos are the successes achieved by ISWAP, as a call to *hijrah*, i.e. migration to the African continent, but specifically Nigeria. ISWAP's military successes are shown but at the same time, life under the territories controlled by the group is also displayed, in the most fascinating and captivating way possible to appeal to the public and demonstrate their governance capabilities. It therefore also tries to convince the local population that may be in the IDP camps to migrate to ISWAP

¹⁴⁶ Garofalo, Daniele . 2022. "Islamic State Propaganda Renews Focus on Africa, but a 'Jihadist Monopoly' Remains Elusive." *Jamestown*, July 2022. <https://jamestown.org/program/islamic-state-propaganda-renews-focus-on-africa-but-a-jihadist-monopoly-remains-elusive/>.

territories, as well as other rural areas under governmental territorial control. Sometimes also operatives are sent directly to IDP camps in an attempt to encourage people to return to their villages¹⁴⁷. ISWAP shows itself to be a better alternative to living abandoned by the state. This is why the aspect of technological advancement is very important, ISWAP is able to produce more and more high-definition and high-quality videos that have a strong impact on the population. Another objective of showing ISWAP's attacks through videos or photos is to demonstrate to the civilian population that the group does not target civilians, that the only targets of their violence are government forces and infidels. This is also confirmed by Al-Barnawi's book and several speeches in which he states that being a Muslim living under the territorial control of the government does not invalidate him as a Muslim, nor does not joining the insurrection¹⁴⁸.

But above all, the message is in a way that if under ISWAP's control, you will not be targeted, otherwise, defying or rebelling against their control could be fatal. For it must be emphasised that yes ISWAP has adopted a less extensive approach to target selection than Shekau's, but it is still a violent group that has no problem responding with force when not obeyed. Their message is best interpreted as a warm invitation to accept ISWAP's control and enter their territories as the best option not to risk violence. The videos seek to demonstrate ISWAP's ability to well administer its territories and convince people to choose to live under the territories under their control as ISWAP can provide them with a better perspective of life. An International Crisis Groups report describes how videos published by ISWAP show well-stocked markets, fat cattle and bountiful crops¹⁴⁹. Stoddard also cites a video from as early as

¹⁴⁷ Stoddard. "Revolutionary Warfare? Assessing the Character of Competing Factions within the Boko Haram Insurgency."

¹⁴⁸ Stoddard. "Revolutionary Warfare? Assessing the Character of Competing Factions within the Boko Haram Insurgency."

¹⁴⁹ International Crisis Group. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province"

2018 in which ISWAP shows scenes of daily life such as working in the fields for agricultural production, with the aim of showing how much more profitable the land under ISWAP's control is¹⁵⁰

9.3 ISWAP providing for economic opportunities, security, and social services

Another aspect that has come to light thanks to ISWAP's extensive propaganda is the group's collection of *zakat*¹⁵¹. This is seen as an appropriation of a religious concept that in jihadist insurgencies takes the form of funding. The term *zakat* refers to the religious obligation imposed on every Muslim by the *Qur'an* to rid or rather purify oneself of one's wealth. One of the pillars of Islam that is often translated as almsgiving, even though it has no voluntary character, it is in fact an obligation. And ISWAP has been perfectly capable of using this concept to tax civilians. Several sources in 2021 reported precisely that ISWAP propagandized widely on its media channels that it distributed money and goods to children and the population at large¹⁵². The *zakat* system stipulates that once a year, every well-off Muslim should donate a certain amount of money in proportion to his savings and possessions. This should then be collected and distributed among the less fortunate. According to various sources in the month of *Ramadan* of 2021 ISWAP collected N 51.9 million which are estimated in USD 156,985¹⁵³. The meaning of *zakat* and the impact it has on ISWAP is not only economic, far from it, this is yet another proof

¹⁵⁰ Stoddard. "Revolutionary Warfare? Assessing the Character of Competing Factions within the Boko Haram Insurgency."

¹⁵¹ Zenn, Jacob. "ISWAP Launches Hearts and Minds Strategy to Counter Nigerian Army Offensive."

¹⁵² Zenn, Jacob. "ISWAP Launches Hearts and Minds Strategy to Counter Nigerian Army Offensive."

¹⁵³ Adebajo, Kunle. 2021. "New Info on Zakat Collection, Distribution Throws Light on ISWAP's Revenue Model." HumAngle. May 28, 2021. <https://humanglemedia.com/new-info-on-zakat-collection-distribution-throws-light-on-iswaps-revenue-model/>.

of the population-centric approach of the group which through the use of this deeply ideological concept creates political bonds with the population¹⁵⁴.

ISWAP managed to integrate itself into the local economy by taking control of most of the economic activities in the area. In doing so, it built a form of governance in the territories they controlled. ISWAP has established a system of taxation on the population, which in 2018 alone accounted for 45% of ISWAP's total inputs¹⁵⁵. It also controls several markets including the fish market, which accounted for 30% of inputs and the rice and pepper markets, more than 20% combined. In this ISWAP is involved in the production, sale and transportation of these commodities, places taxes on fishermen and traders from areas outside its control, places taxes on commercial transporters passing along ISWAP-controlled roads and much more¹⁵⁶. Any activity carried out for ISWAP or independently is still subject to taxation and the territories under its control remain for the exclusive use of the community under ISWAP rule. This has also facilitated economic activity, which is why several reports have revealed that agricultural production has actually increased in territories under ISWAP. In addition, ISWAP has taken over a practice already widely used by Boko Haram, such as Micro-loan, or soft-loans, to local youth and farmers¹⁵⁷. ISWAP places a caps on local agricultural products so that the community can have access to basic food at moderate

¹⁵⁴Thurston, Alex. 2021. "Why Jihadists Are Collecting 'Zakat' in the Sahel." *Political Violence at a Glance*. July 12, 2021. <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2021/07/12/why-jihadists-are-collecting-zakat-in-the-sahel/>.

¹⁵⁵The Conflict Studies And Analysis Project. "SURVIVAL and EXPANSION: The Islamic State's West African Province."

¹⁵⁶ The Conflict Studies And Analysis Project. "SURVIVAL and EXPANSION: The Islamic State's West African Province."

¹⁵⁷ Stoddard. "Revolutionary Warfare? Assessing the Character of Competing Factions within the Boko Haram Insurgency."

prices¹⁵⁸. However, Hassan states that in addition to taxing people, ISWAP provides local farmers with agricultural inputs such as seeds, distributes fertilizer, and engages in community projects such as well construction¹⁵⁹. ISWAP's attraction in this was to provide and make available again to the population those activities that had disappeared due to government blockades on major transport routes, such as the Maiduguri-Baga and Maiduguru-Gamboru-Ngala, to avoid Boko Haram's dependence on fish trading¹⁶⁰. ISWAP has committed itself to secure trade routes that has encouraged fishing and farming in the areas around the islands of Lake Chad, attracting people who had previously migrated from those areas. Likewise, cattle rearing has also revived. In this light, taxes seem to be seen as being fair by the civilians, who have resumed their commercial activities thanks to ISWAP. Especially because, compared to the system under Shekau, civilians now do not fear harassment or their crops and/or cattle being rustled, they pay a tax that allows them to live under a security system. In fact, ISWAP's role within the scheme to garner local support is also to provide a security service to local communities. Under ISWAP control, they do not fear the threat of JAS fighters, not even government forces or the banditry phenomenon, which seems to have disappeared from ISWAP areas¹⁶¹. This was also actually reported as a major security issue referring to ISWAP's relationship with banditry¹⁶². As mentioned above, as a result of the reforms, ISWAP has also made itself accountable for the behaviour of its fighters with harsh

¹⁵⁸ International Crisis Group. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province."

¹⁵⁹ Hassan, Idayat. "Rebel Governance? A Literature Review of Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province."

¹⁶⁰ Samuel, Malik. 2019. "Economics of Terrorism in Lake Chad Basin - ISS Africa." ISS Africa. July 10, 2019. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/economics-of-terrorism-in-lake-chad-basin>.

¹⁶¹ International Crisis Group. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province."

¹⁶² Emily Estelle Perez. "The Underestimated Insurgency, Continued: Salafi-Jihadi Capabilities and Opportunities in Africa."

penalties. ISWAP monitors its fighters to ensure that they respect civilians and do not allow them to abuse the population; they have also ordered them not to carry weapons in places that are considered safe and unless necessary¹⁶³.

Linked to the concept of security is also the fact that ISWAP has established a judicial system according to *Sharia* law that deals, among other things, with resolving disputes between herders and farmers for example. ISWAP has therefore imposed a system of governance according to Islamic justice through local chiefs or *amirs* who are in charge of resolving these disputes within the local community, or allocating grazing lands, adjudicating trespassing charges and seizing errant cattle, which the herders can recover upon payment of a fee¹⁶⁴. The imposition of *Sharia* also imposes certain norms of behaviour. For instance, the imposition of the hijab on women and arranged marriages with ISWAP fighters in order to stimulate integration. But it also imposes a very strict and, in some cases, brutal penal code, including cutting off hands for robbery and killing for adultery. Non-payment of taxes or non-compliance with the authorisations given can also trigger very severe punishments. The religious aspect is of course also very present and important, imposing obligations on the time of prayer and certain polices of public morality. Although the state schools under ISWAP's control have been closed, they have also provided for a number of public services including education. By banishing the Western type of education, an Islamic type of education is promoted, which according to Berlingozzi and Stoddard is mainly provided by women¹⁶⁵. Among other things, ISWAP has committed itself to providing a health care service. The medicines and instruments

¹⁶³ International Crisis Group. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province."

¹⁶⁴ International Crisis Group. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province."

¹⁶⁵ Berlingozzi, Laura, and Ed Stoddard. "Assessing Misaligned Counterinsurgency Practice in Niger and Nigeria."

used often come from raids carried out in health centres¹⁶⁶. In addition to this, ISWAP was also able to organise the transfer of very sick patients to nearby government hospitals. It has also been involved in the construction of latrines and enabled humanitarian workers to carry out polio vaccinations, which have been at the centre of great controversy in northern Nigeria¹⁶⁷. In a country that has always lacked an efficient health system, this service has had a strong impact on the population.

9.4 The population-centric approach implemented by ISWAP

The population-centric form of insurgency adopted by ISWAP is indeed developing a sort of 'welfare non-state' as proposed by Donelli, which is offering the local communities a better socio-political alternative to the one offered by the federal state¹⁶⁸. And it is doing this according to the competitive control system scheme mentioned above, having been able to impose itself and gained an advantage over the other rival factions (in the competition for population's support). Reflecting what Stoddard expressed as 'hearts and minds based competitive control system', ISWAP has developed this system in the most efficient way, providing the population with predictability, stability and security¹⁶⁹. By creating an economic, social and to a small extent political system (referring to the existing judicial system), ISWAP guaranteed the population a system they needed and could rely on, as the best alternative among those available. Part of the population of north-eastern Nigeria remained in or returned to ISWAP-controlled territories voluntarily precisely for the reasons listed above. However, this does not totally exclude the fact that

¹⁶⁶ Hassan, Idayat. "Rebel Governance? A Literature Review of Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province."

¹⁶⁷ International Crisis Group. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province."

¹⁶⁸ Federico, Donelli. 2022. "An alternative governance proposal emerges from the feud within Boko Haram." Osservatorio Strategico 2022 – Anno XXIV n. IV 63.

¹⁶⁹ Stoddard, Edward. "Competitive Control? 'Hearts and Minds' and the Population Control Strategy of the Islamic State West Africa Province."

ISWAP exercises high levels of violence and that its system is still highly persuasive and coercive. The violence that ISWAP triggers occurs in the hypothetical case of exit, rather than entry, to its system. Because ISWAP is not non-violent per se, or non-coercive intrinsically, rather it is non-violent if the situation does not call for it. ISWAP, competing for control and support of the population with JAS and the Nigerian authorities, does not need to be overly violent as it presents itself as the best alternative among those present and thus encourages people to join its system of governance. ISWAP then proves to be violent anyway when there is rebellion or non-compliance with the rules imposed by them. In fact, the system of competitive control turns out to be a system from which it is very difficult for people to get out, Stoddard describes it as a ‘trap-like form of governance’¹⁷⁰. If JAS targeted Muslim civilians indiscriminately, ISWAP's violence is again targeted, in the sense that it is aimed at those, even the population under its control, who go against the group's directives. More simplistically, ISWAP's system of governance works that if one follows and does not oppose what is required to, it won't face violence harsh punishments will be meted out. This, however, falls within the sphere of predictability mentioned earlier, which therefore still makes people aware that it is in their hands to avoid violence. Non-compliance with tax payments as well as non-compliance with socio-moral norms is severely punished, even as a warning to the rest of the population.

¹⁷⁰ Stoddard, Edward. “Competitive Control? ‘Hearts and Minds’ and the Population Control Strategy of the Islamic State West Africa Province.”

Conclusion

The research aimed to illustrate the factors that allowed the Islamic State West Africa Province to expand its influence. These included the links with the Islamic State, the reasons for the separation from Boko Haram, and the techniques and strategies employed that enabled ISWAP's growth and advancement. In addition, the techniques and strategies implemented allowed ISWAP to assert a certain type of control and it was presented how a more population-oriented approach affected its evolution and how ISWAP developed a system of control over its territories. It is also shown how this control is more related to the population factor than to the territory factor. In conclusion, the purpose of the research was to present the particularity of the case of the Islamic State West Africa province as an insurgent group in West Africa. A region characterised by continuous waves of violence and crises of various kinds, the Salafi-jihadist threat occupies a very prominent place on the scale of priorities of the governments affected. Specifically, the splinter faction that has emerged from Boko Haram is posing and may pose an even greater threat in the future. This is because as it is stratum argued in the research, the group has in general shaped its insurgence around the concept of a population-centric approach, which has favoured it not only possibilities for growth but above all for consolidation of its power and control not only over a territory but over the population. In fact, both the difference and the particularity of ISWAP compared to the original Boko Haram group is that it has interpreted territorial control as something transitory and has instead directed its efforts towards controlling the local population and attracting it to the group. This precisely makes ISWAP a much more serious threat as it is proving to be the best in the field at fulfilling the Islamic caliphate agenda.

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