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After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria's North East

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What's new? The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), the most powerful faction of the jihadist movement known as Boko Haram, has since May 2021 largely decimated its rival led by the late Abubakar Shekau, seizing new territory. The authorities have stepped up military operations and other stabilisation efforts to counter ISWAP.

How did it happen? ISWAP's power grab comes after years of tensions within Boko Haram that eventually splintered the movement. The Islamic State (ISIS) core appears to have intensified its support for dissenting commanders who broke with Shekau in 2016, seeing them as more reliable partners in fighting the Nigerian state.

Why does it matter? While the Nigerian military's increased air capacity has allowed it to better defend garrison towns, ISWAP has gained in strength since Shekau's death. It is expanding into new rural areas in Nigeria's north east. Scattered former Shekau fighters may further aggravate insecurity elsewhere in northern Nigeria.

What should be done? Authorities should redouble efforts to demobilise fighters from Shekau's group. They should be discerning when resettling civilians in state-controlled towns situated in ISWAP areas, where they could be caught in the crossfire or subject to the group's taxation. Abuja and its partners should tighten intelligence cooperation to stem the flow of ISIS support to ISWAP.

I. Overview

The local franchise of the Islamic State (ISIS) is consolidating its grip on new rural areas in Nigeria's central and southern Borno state. The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) has decimated the rival jihadist faction Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS), whose deceased leader Abubakar Shekau once headed the group known as Boko Haram. Nigeria's air force has largely staved off ISWAP attacks on north-eastern towns where Nigerian troops are garrisoned. Borno's state government considers that, in the service of "stabilisation", it can start closing camps hosting hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the conflict. But authorities should not push civilians to resettle in places where ISWAP is active. They should step up efforts to contain ISWAP by better handling jihadist defectors and seeking the surrender of scattered JAS elements. By doing so, they can reduce the risk of spillover conflicts that ISWAP might exploit. Nigeria and its neighbours should also enhance intelligence

cooperation, notably to curb what appears to be an influx of advice and money from the ISIS core.

ISWAP's power continues to grow. In May 2021, ISWAP fighters stormed the Sambisa forest where they cornered JAS leader Shekau. He detonated a suicide vest, killing himself. ISIS had apparently authorised the operation, which brought to a head tensions that had already split the Boko Haram insurgency into two main factions, ISWAP and JAS. Since Shekau's death, ISWAP has absorbed several JAS fighting groups into its ranks, but it still faces resistance from other pro-JAS units, notably the Bakura group encroaching upon the marshes, banks and islands of northern Lake Chad. At the same time, many JAS elements have opted to surrender to Nigerian authorities rather than submit to ISWAP, while some may have fled to other parts of northern Nigeria.

With JAS largely out of the way, ISWAP has expanded into rural Borno and has again intensified operations against the Nigerian military, staging numerous smaller attacks to adapt to intensified aerial bombardment. ISWAP claimed more attacks in 2021 than in 2020, though those attacks caused fewer fatalities.

ISWAP's consolidation of power in rural Borno, which has been years in the making, represents a serious threat to security in northern Nigeria and neighbouring regions in Chad, Niger and Cameroon. Although core ISIS initially backed Shekau as Boko Haram's overall leader in 2015, which is when the entire movement rebranded itself as ISWAP, it threw its weight behind the dissenting commanders who broke away from Shekau the following year. This decision appears to reflect concerns that the latter's erratic leadership style and brutal treatment of civilians was weakening and discrediting the movement. ISIS has channelled training, operational guidance and, at times, money to its ISWAP franchise. Abandoned by the ISIS core, Shekau was left in charge of a rump faction of Boko Haram, which reverted to the JAS appellation that historically had been the group's formal name. He claimed that he nonetheless maintained his allegiance to ISIS.

ISWAP's evolving tactics appear to have enabled recent gains. It has been consolidating a semblance of governance over the rural territory it controls. It is allowing civilians freedom of movement, encouraging more of them to live and trade in areas under its control, and then taxing them to mobilise resources. Left unchecked, ISWAP is likely to continue to grow in strength and seek opportunities to expand further. Though Nigeria's military has recently increased its use of airpower to strike ISWAP targets and has improved coordination between air and ground forces, its military efforts – and those of its regional allies – have so far fallen short of reversing ISWAP's advances in rural areas.

Beyond military engagement, Nigeria has explored other approaches to contain the militant threat. It has set up and progressively upgraded Operation Safe Corridor, a useful program to receive jihadist defectors for reintegration into society, despite opposition from politicians and communities who perceive it as spending public resources to help people they believe should be punished instead. Despite its shortcomings, this program has done much by its very existence to encourage JAS fighters to surrender following Shekau's death. Operation Safe Corridor has no space to host new defectors, however, leaving Borno state authorities to manage over 30,000 people (including roughly 2,000 defectors) who have fled areas formerly under JAS control. Without sufficient resources in place to reintegrate these persons, particularly the

JAS elements among them, there is a substantial risk that some return to jihadism or move to conflict zones elsewhere in Nigeria's north.

Separately, state authorities have mobilised federal officials and international donors to cooperate in a strategy for the "stabilisation" of Borno. This strategy includes pushing for closure of camps hosting hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons and refugees who arrived in the Maiduguri area amid a major JAS offensive in 2013-2014. Borno's state government would like to bring as many as possible back to their areas of origin. While appropriate in some cases, closing displaced persons camps often forces people to choose between settling in garrison towns, where food prices are high and access to agricultural resources is limited, and farming, fishing or herding cattle in rural areas that could be under ISWAP control. The latter is a particularly risky endeavour, as the security forces could perceive those who opt for agricultural pursuits as ISWAP sympathisers.

In the short term, despite its renewed efforts, Nigeria's military is unlikely to vanquish ISWAP or weaken it enough to force engagement in meaningful negotiations – which it shows little interest in pursuing – without a change in circumstances. The authorities should therefore focus on containing it. Federal authorities, the military and Borno's government should together develop a coherent process to receive and reintegrate JAS defectors. Abuja should work with state governments to encourage scattered JAS elements to surrender rather than allowing them to create instability in these new locations and present ISWAP with new expansion opportunities. Authorities should think twice before adopting policies that might lead the displaced back to enclaves in ISWAP-controlled areas and keep camps in Maiduguri open for those who wish to stay. They could also help the displaced settle more durably near the city, where they will enjoy greater safety and opportunities. Abuja and its regional allies should tighten intelligence cooperation to restrict ISIS's material support for its Nigerian franchise.

II. ISWAP Expands in Rural Borno

In mid-May 2021, ISWAP fighters stormed the Sambisa forest in Nigeria's north-eastern Borno state, the stronghold of Abubakar Shekau, formerly supreme leader of the jihadist movement commonly referred to as Boko Haram.¹ The operation, which led to Shekau's death, was the culmination of years of friction within the group. In 2015, Shekau had sworn allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the caliph of the Islamic State, and taken up the ISWAP name. Barely a year later, the movement split, with one faction securing the recognition of ISIS under the ISWAP banner while Shekau revert-

¹ Boko Haram, which in Hausa means "Western education is forbidden", is a derogatory term popularised by the group's critics to mock its hostility toward modern schooling. It is used here either to designate the movement before the split or to refer to its factions together. The designation ISWAP is taken here to mean only the ISIS affiliate operating in the Lake Chad basin, not the other one moving among Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, which ISIS initially placed under the ISWAP flag, and which commentators sometimes call the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. The latter was officially separated from ISWAP by March 2022, when ISIS started to call it the Sahel Province.

ed to the original JAS designation.² Eventually, ISWAP fighters riding in dozens of open-topped vehicles mounted with heavy weapons attacked Shekau in the forest south of Borno's state capital Maiduguri.³ After ISWAP caught up with Shekau on 19 May and offered him a path to surrender, he detonated a suicide vest, killing himself and wounding ISWAP fighters.⁴

Following Shekau's death, ISWAP moved fast into new parts of Borno. To begin with, it opened negotiations with Shekau's surviving commanders, folding as many as eighteen JAS fighting groups operating in the Sambisa forest into its ranks.⁵ By mid-June, it appeared that ISWAP had annexed much of the forest to its domain, which consisted of the next-door Alagarno forest and the islands and shores of the southern part of Lake Chad. It also began carrying out attacks on the Nigerian and Cameroonian militaries from territory previously under JAS control.⁶ On 21 June 2021, ISWAP's then leader Habib Yusuf (also known as Abu Musab al-Barnawi) released an audio sermon calling on Shekau's followers across northern Nigeria to rally to ISWAP.⁷ Days later, on 25 June, ISIS circulated via social media a video of a group of fighters formerly loyal to Shekau swearing allegiance to ISWAP.⁸ The same day, ISIS's spokesman praised ISWAP for its "victory".⁹

ISIS appears to have influenced ISWAP's decision to move against JAS. After the 2016 split, ISIS had forbidden ISWAP to attack JAS and ISWAP had obeyed, though it continued to denounce Shekau.¹⁰ In the months prior to the 2021 attack, contacts between ISIS and ISWAP had intensified.¹¹ In the first half of 2021, dozens of local

² See Crisis Group Africa Report N°273, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, 16 May 2019; and Vincent Foucher, "The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad", Crisis Group Commentary, 29 October 2020.

³ ISWAP had apparently negotiated its way into the Sambisa forest with some of Shekau's men. Shekau himself mentions ISWAP's entry in the audio he released shortly before his death in May 2021. For a translation and commentary, see Vincent Foucher, "Last Words of Abubakar Shekau: A Testament in the Politics of Jihadi Extraversion", *Sources, Materials and Fieldwork in African Studies*, no. 3 (2021).

⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former JAS and ISWAP members, May and June 2021. Some of these events are also detailed in an article published in the ISIS weekly magazine. *Al-Naba*, 1 July 2021.

⁵ Audio on file with Crisis Group. These recordings are dated 25 and 26 May 2021.

⁶ Notable attacks that Amaq, the ISIS media branch, claimed in ISWAP's name included those in Komdi (Damboa local government area) on 15 June, Kumshe (Bama local government area) and Lawanti (Konduga local government area) on 20 June, and Mayanti (Bama local government area) on 21 June. For maps of attacks claimed by ISWAP in each quarter of 2021, see Appendix E.

⁷ Habib Yusuf is one of the surviving sons of Boko Haram's founder Muhammad Yusuf. The original audio in Hausa is available at "ISWAP – Abu Musab al-Barnawi's audio 'To the one who calls himself al-Shekawi'", Unmasking Boko Haram (blog), 21 June 2021.

⁸ For an English translation, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The defeat of Abu Bakr Shekau's group in Sambisa forest", Pundicity (blog), 28 June 2021.

⁹ For an English translation, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "'And you are the supreme ones if you are believers' – New speech by Islamic State spokesman", Pundicity (blog), 27 June 2021.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, former ISWAP and JAS associates, Maiduguri, February-March 2020. For an example of ISWAP's continuing critique of Shekau, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State West Africa Province vs. Abu Bakr Shekau: Full text, translation and analysis", Pundicity (blog), 5 August 2018.

¹¹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP associates, 25 April and 1 July 2021.

fighters who had spent time with ISIS abroad, possibly in Libya, returned to the Lake Chad area.¹²

Then, just prior to the attack on Shekau, Yusuf, who is known in ISWAP circles as having a particularly close relationship with ISIS, re-emerged as the group's leader (he had stood down from his leadership position in 2019 in the midst of a challenge to his authority by several senior ISWAP leaders).¹³ In his comeback speech released on 9 May 2021, he insisted that all those under ISWAP's command show their obedience to ISIS, explaining that he was returning to his position only in an interim function "pending the time when the Commander of the Faithful [ie, the ISIS leader] decides what will become of the leadership".¹⁴ In a June recording, he stated that ISIS had directed the Sambisa operation.¹⁵

ISWAP's dismantling of JAS has not been as smooth as ISIS publicly made out, however. Some JAS groups that rallied to ISWAP subsequently seceded, while other pro-JAS groups have continued to challenge ISWAP. The biggest among the latter is the so-called Bakura group founded by a commander named Ibrahim Bakura Doron.¹⁶ Since June 2021, when it attacked ISWAP in Tumbun Gini, a strategic location on Lake Chad, the Bakura group has had numerous clashes with its rival.¹⁷ A number of JAS commanders fleeing the Sambisa area have joined the group.¹⁸

Meanwhile, smaller pro-JAS groups, notably in the Mandara mountains along the Cameroon-Nigeria border and in the periphery of the Sambisa forest, have re-

¹² Ibid. The return of 80 fighters from Libya in April is mentioned in Malik Samuel, "Islamic State fortifies its position in the Lake Chad basin", ISS, 13 July 2021.

¹³ Habib Yusuf and his brother Abba (also known as Ibn Abbas) had played a key role in managing ISWAP's relations with ISIS. Yusuf stepped down in 2019, apparently because senior ISWAP figures felt he was too young to be the group's overall leader. ISIS never officially endorsed Yusuf's successors, Ba Idrissa (also known as Ibn Umar) and Ba Lawan (also known as Abu Hafs), though it maintained close links to the group. Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP members, 26 January and 19 June 2021; interview, former ISWAP member, Maiduguri 2 December 2019. See also Crisis Group Report, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, op. cit., p. 20-21. Lastly, see Jacob Zenn, *Unmasking Boko Haram* (Boulder, 2020), p. 308, which discusses the role of Yusuf and his brother.

¹⁴ Yusuf's comeback speech in Kanuri and Hausa is available at "ISWAP – Abu Musab al-Barnawi leadership reinstatement audio", Unmasking Boko Haram (blog), 18 May 2021.

¹⁵ The audio is available in Hausa at "ISWAP – Abu Musab al-Barnawi audio explaining Abubakar Shekau's death", Unmasking Boko Haram (blog), 10 June 2021. In the absence of conclusive evidence, it is also possible that Yusuf took action and then claimed it was sanctioned by ISIS.

¹⁶ Bakura is known as Doron because of his connection to the town of Baga Doron on the southern shores of Lake Chad. According to a former member of the group, Bakura Sahalaba, who served as an Islamic judge (*qadi*), replaced Bakura Doron as the top leader soon after Shekau's death, as solid religious credentials are needed for this position. But Bakura Doron reportedly remains the operational leader. Crisis Group telephone interview, former JAS/Bakura Group member, 18 October 2021. Sahalaba's video statement on the death of Shekau is available in Hausa at "Boko Haram Lake Chad Bakura faction's response after Abubakar Shekau's death", Unmasking Boko Haram (blog), 14 June 2021.

¹⁷ An anonymous source quoted in a press report said more than 100 jihadists of unspecified affiliation were killed in a fight that pitted ISWAP against Bakura in September 2021. "Nigeria jihadist infighting kills scores in Lake Chad", France 24, 28 September 2021. A reliable independent security expert consulted by Crisis Group, however, said only two ISWAP fighters were killed and two others wounded in this episode. Crisis Group correspondence, 25 October 2021.

¹⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former JAS members, 31 August and 4 October 2021.

sumed operations. In what has become the classic style of JAS, they tend to avoid direct confrontation with ISWAP and instead focus on raiding villages, including in Cameroon and on the outskirts of Maiduguri, for supplies, cattle and motorbikes.¹⁹ For its part, ISWAP has launched repeated attacks on these groups, dismantling some of them but failing to uproot others.²⁰ It has also exerted pressure on locals it suspects of collaborating with them.

The resistance it has faced has taken a toll on ISWAP. In August, Yusuf was reportedly wounded in combat with Bakura fighters in the Lake Chad area.²¹ The next month, while rumours of Yusuf's death circulated, ISWAP released a propaganda video showing its troops engaged in combat, as well as images of dozens of alleged captured JAS fighters, in an apparent attempt to project the image that it was prevailing over hold-out JAS groups. In the same video, one of ISWAP's commanders called on JAS elements who had pledged allegiance to ISIS to honour their oath by remaining in the Sambisa forest under ISWAP command, a tacit admission that the situation was not under control.²² ISWAP then deployed patrols and checkpoints to curb the exodus of JAS elements from the forest.²³

These tactics did not quite stem the outflow. Since Shekau's death, at least 2,000 JAS fighters, fleeing the area alongside over 30,000 civilians, have handed themselves over to authorities in Nigeria and Cameroon rather than remain under ISWAP's rule.²⁴ According to Nigerian officials, some JAS fighters are now heading to other states, primarily in Nigeria's north, plagued by an explosion of criminal and other violence over the last few years, and locals fear they could aggravate instability there.²⁵ Such fears have merit, given previous evidence of Boko Haram elements leaving north-eastern Nigeria to resettle elsewhere in the north, either to get away from Shekau or to raise money for Shekau via kidnappings.²⁶ Shekau had claimed he had the alle-

¹⁹ A main leader of these dissenters is Ali Ngulle or Ngulde, a former Shekau unit commander or *qaid*. Crisis Group correspondence, Cameroonian researcher and civil society activist, 4 November 2021. Locals tell of extensive cattle rustling near Maiduguri. Crisis Group telephone interview, Fulani community leader, 14 February 2022.

²⁰ Crisis Group correspondence, security analyst, 9-10 September 2021; telephone interview, Cameroonian civil society activist, 11 January 2022.

²¹ Crisis Group phone interview, former ISWAP member, 8 September 2021; correspondence, security analyst, 30 October 2021.

²² Video on file with Crisis Group.

²³ Crisis Group telephone interview, former JAS and ISWAP member, 8 August 2021.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Nigerian security official, Abuja, 7 February 2022. The Twitter feeds of the Cameroonian media organisation @sembetv and Cameroonian NGO @APPIC6 have reported on the wave of surrenders in Cameroon quite closely. See also Obi Anyadike, "Quit while you're ahead: Why Boko Haram fighters are surrendering", *New Humanitarian*, 12 August 2021.

²⁵ "Terrorists fleeing Sambisa forest to Kaduna, DSS tells civil defence", *The Punch*, 15 September 2021. The security services reportedly thought Boko Haram was involved in an attack on the train that links Abuja, the federal capital, to the north central state of Kaduna, but the term Boko Haram is often employed loosely in Nigeria for each and every Muslim insurgent. See, for instance, "FG confirms Abuja-Kaduna train attack, suspends operation", *The Sun* (Nigeria), 21 October 2021. On the situation in the north west, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°288, *Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem*, 18 May 2020.

²⁶ Shekau mentioned disgruntled followers leaving in late 2015 or early 2016 for the Falgore forest, at the juncture of Bauchi, Kano and Kaduna states. See Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa,

giance of jihadists in Zamfara and Niger states.²⁷ Yusuf, in his messaging after Shekau's death, called on JAS groups in north-western states to rally to ISWAP.²⁸

It is too early to say how many JAS fighters have moved into other parts of northern Nigeria as a result of Shekau's death or what effect these developments would have on the security situation there. There are real obstacles to establishing links between jihadists and rural criminal gangs (known as "bandits") operating across Nigeria north west, but some form of collaboration could occur.²⁹ The scattering of JAS elements could eventually benefit ISWAP if it decides to look beyond north-eastern Nigeria and tries to develop a presence all the way to the north west. It has given no sign of wanting to do so in the past, but Yusuf's call on Shekau's followers in the north west, ISWAP's first public reference to operations outside the Lake Chad basin, may point in this direction.

The Bakura group, meanwhile, remains hemmed into the Lake Chad area. It has gained from the relocation of JAS fighters from the Sambisa forest but remains weaker than ISWAP, enjoys no ISIS assistance and lives off raids on the local population for loot, ransom and captives.³⁰ While the group is powerful on the lake thanks to its fleet of motorised canoes mounted with heavy weapons and can launch raids elsewhere, it has too few land vehicles to durably challenge ISWAP on terra firma.³¹ Bakura reportedly sent several letters and audio recordings to ISWAP sometime in late 2021 or early 2022 asking to settle the conflict between the two factions.³² Recurrent lulls in combat between the groups seem to confirm that some sort of conversation has indeed taken place.

In a telling contrast to JAS, only a trickle of defections from ISWAP has been reported since 2021, illustrating the group's resilience. In recent months, Nigerian media have repeatedly cited security sources reporting the deaths of major ISWAP figures, including Yusuf himself, who went curiously silent after releasing several lengthy audio recordings between May and July.³³ These reports must be taken with caution, however, given that security sources announced Shekau's death several times before his actual demise in 2021. Sources with insight into ISWAP's operations told Crisis

The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State (London, 2018), chapter 74; Crisis Group telephone interviews, former JAS members, 31 August 2021 and 8 March 2022.

²⁷ For a map of Nigeria and its component states, see Appendix A. Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's Expansionary Project in Northwestern Nigeria: Can Shekau Outflank Ansaru and Islamic State in West African Province?", The Jamestown Foundation, 28 July 2020.

²⁸ Audio on file with Crisis Group.

²⁹ For a discussion of these obstacles, see James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, "Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a 'Banditization' of Jihad?", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2022).

³⁰ Crisis Group correspondence, Nigerien researchers, February 2022; telephone interviews, former Bakura faction members and herders, February–March 2022.

³¹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former JAS and ISWAP members, August and October 2021.

³² Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP members, 16 January and 17 February 2022; correspondence, security analyst, 17 November 2021.

³³ "West Africa's top ISIL leader is dead, says Nigerian army", Al Jazeera, 14 October 2021; "Nigerian army says Islamic State West Africa's new leader killed in military operation", Reuters, 29 October 2021. Audio of a conversation between alleged ISWAP members about Yusuf's injury is available in Hausa at "ISWAP – Audio on Abu Musab al-Barnawi's succession mentioning Bakura's injury and Mallam Bako's new leadership", Unmasking Boko Haram (blog), 16 November 2021.

Group that Yusuf was wounded in combat with Bakura but given a larger, though unspecified, African mandate by ISIS after he recovered from his injuries.³⁴

In a seeming sign of unity, Abul Musanna, a son of Abubakar Shekau, is now said to occupy a key position in ISWAP.³⁵ There is confusion about the identity of the *wali* (governor), possibly because ISWAP seems to have formalised the existence of sub-units with their own *wali* or sub-*wali* (the names of two senior military commanders, Bako Gorgore and Ali Abdullahi, and a cleric, Sani Shuwaram, have been mentioned).³⁶ There has been no official communication from ISWAP or ISIS on this matter to date.

Whatever the truth, ISWAP's fighters and commanders have remained steadfast to the group.³⁷ ISWAP has also maintained its operational tempo, even when dealing with JAS and despite the Nigerian military's heightened aerial campaign. As large-scale attacks expose groups of militants more easily to aircraft, ISWAP has shifted to smaller operations, roadblocks, complex ambushes and improvised explosive devices. ISWAP claimed more attacks in 2021 than ever before, and it has been highly active in 2022, claiming 44 attacks in February alone, its second-highest monthly tally to date.³⁸ It has expanded its operations toward southern Borno, northern Adamawa and the regions of Mayo Sava and Mayo Tsanaga in Cameroon.³⁹ Humanitarian workers report a dramatic diminution of their access in Borno outside Maiduguri, with a growing number of roads becoming too dangerous to use.⁴⁰

III. ISWAP's Governance Model

ISWAP's blitz against Shekau has its roots in the long history of tensions within Boko Haram, especially over the movement's ideological and operational direction.⁴¹ On the ideological front, Shekau's belief that all those, including Muslim civilians, who did not follow him or simply lived outside his group's control were "unbelievers" and could be killed or enslaved stirred heavy criticism of him by other top Boko

³⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP member, 17 February 2022; correspondence, diplomat, 20 February 2022.

³⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP member, 17 February 2022; correspondence, diplomat, 19 February 2022.

³⁶ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP members, 9 November 2021; correspondence, Nigerian security official, 22 November 2021; security analyst, 16 January 2022. See also "ISWAP appoints Sani Shuwaram as new leader... plans missions in northern Borno", PR Nigeria, 6 November 2021. Various Nigerian media outlets have put out conflicting reports about the sub-*walis* and some of the persons mentioned above have been reported killed at various times.

³⁷ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former JAS and ISWAP members, August and September 2021; humanitarian official, 26 November 2011. In March 2022, the ISIS core published several sets of pictures of ISWAP sub-groups renewing their allegiance to the new caliph, Abul-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, to confirm their loyalty to the group.

³⁸ See Appendix C. ISWAP had claimed 50 attacks in May 2019. Crisis Group correspondence, security expert, 1 March 2022.

³⁹ See Appendix E.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri and Abuja, January and February 2022.

⁴¹ For more on this history, see Crisis Group Report, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, op. cit.; and Foucher, "The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad", op. cit.

Haram figures. So did his corresponding brutality, internal purges, hoarding and erratic management style.⁴²

Against this backdrop, the movement's trajectory began to shift following a string of military defeats at the hands of the Nigerian military and its regional partners in 2015.⁴³ Around the time of these defeats, Shekau's critics in JAS (Boko Haram's own designation then) and a small group of experienced Arab ISIS militants who had come to the Sambisa forest to help pushed Shekau to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, then the leader of ISIS.⁴⁴ They hoped that al-Baghdadi would rein in Shekau's excesses and reorder the group. In March 2015, Shekau reluctantly swore fealty to al-Baghdadi, and JAS became ISWAP.

Despite his pledge, Shekau failed to appease his critics. He apparently refused to heed his Arab advisers' pleas that he improve relations with the population and instead continued his abuses.⁴⁵ He even chased away the Arabs.⁴⁶ Eventually, around mid-2016, with Nigeria's security forces stepping up their counter-offensive and tensions within the movement spiralling, Yusuf and his stepfather Mamman Nur, an influential cleric, led a group of dissenters from the Sambisa forest to the islands and shores of Lake Chad, rallying the bulk of the jihadists who were based there. Bakura Doron, then a junior commander based in that area, refused to disown Shekau and regrouped like-minded fighters on the Lake's northern fringes, at the juncture of the borders of Chad, Niger and Nigeria.⁴⁷

Despite having its own reservations about Shekau, ISIS was caught off guard by the split in the movement. It tried to mediate, but the rift between the factions was too deep. ISIS eventually came to the view that it had no choice but to stick with Yusuf and Nur, with whom it had better relations and who were more responsive to its guidelines.⁴⁸ In August 2016, it recognised Yusuf as the *wali* of ISWAP. Shekau meanwhile reverted to calling his group JAS, although he insisted, presumably to appeal to those in JAS ranks who continued to idealise ISIS, that he remained loyal to the latter.⁴⁹ As noted above, ISIS advised the two sides to refrain from attacking each other, an order that was largely complied with, even if the occasional skirmish still broke out when Shekau fighters raided civilians in areas controlled by ISWAP.⁵⁰ Both sides would avoid direct confrontation with each other until Yusuf's blitz in May 2021.

⁴² Shekau's polarising leadership style was a key factor in the creation of Ansaru, a splinter group closely aligned with al-Qaeda, in 2012. Ansaru tried to develop outside Nigeria's north east, particularly in the centre north, but the security services soon dismantled it. It stopped claiming attacks between 2013 and 2020. It has once again shown signs of life, however, starting with an attack on a convoy of a traditional leader in Kaduna state in 2020. Caleb Weiss, "Ansaru publicly returns to Nigeria", *Long War Journal*, 17 January 2020.

⁴³ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°120, *Boko Haram on the Back Foot?*, 4 May 2016.

⁴⁴ The role of the Arab advisers is discussed in Foucher, "The Islamic State Franchises in Africa", *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former JAS and ISWAP members, Maiduguri, February-March 2020.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, former JAS member, Maiduguri, 29 February 2020.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former Bakura faction and ISWAP members, September-October 2021 and March 2022.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, former ISWAP member, Maiduguri, 2 March 2020.

⁴⁹ Foucher, "Last Words of Abubakar Shekau", *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, herder, Maiduguri, 28 March 2018; and by telephone, 20 August 2021.

ISWAP, over time, evolved into a considerably different organisation than JAS, at least in part because of the training and guidance from ISIS. It also appears to have benefited from financial support – sometimes fairly significant – from outside sources. That assistance was important in the early years of Boko Haram's transformation into ISWAP, notably in 2015 and 2016, though the flow of cash was sometimes disrupted by the arrests of those carrying it between Nigeria and the transfer hub Dubai.⁵¹ It is not clear how much money ISIS sends to ISWAP at present. Yet ISIS has always continued to give advice, enabling ISWAP to develop a more disciplined and better trained standing army by comparison to Shekau's militia units.⁵²

ISIS strongly encouraged ISWAP to improve relations with Muslim civilians and instal a stable taxation system to replace the arbitrary, ruthless and counterproductive system of looting for which Shekau's troops had become infamous.⁵³ ISWAP has not shied away from cruelly punishing those it sees as contravening its interpretation of Sharia, amputating the hands of alleged thieves and killing adulterers, and on several occasions, it has massacred civilians suspected of supporting the government or in communities that refused to pay taxes or disobeyed orders. It has also been ruthless toward the Christian minority in north-eastern Nigeria, probably partly to demonstrate its loyalty to ISIS.⁵⁴ On the flip side of the coin, ISWAP has generally maintained a welcoming attitude toward Muslims and has abstained from the kind of abuses that Shekau indulged in, notably kidnappings and forced marriages of women and girls and forced recruitment of boys. ISWAP has a record of punishing fighters who have committed unauthorised abuses.

This change from Shekau's time, as well as ISWAP's role in settling local disputes through Sharia courts, and its punishment of cattle rustlers and other thieves, has won the group a degree of acceptance from locals.⁵⁵

Residents of areas under ISWAP control report seeing a number of advantages of living under ISWAP rule in contrast to those who live under JAS, and ISWAP is certainly working to cultivate that impression.⁵⁶ One herder familiar with ISWAP-

⁵¹ See "6 Nigerians sentenced for funding Boko Haram terrorist group", Voice of America, 10 November 2020. In the case of one series of transfers from Dubai, it was reported that the accused transferred \$782,000 between 2015 and 2016. Several former jihadist associates interviewed by Crisis Group mentioned knowledge of or direct involvement with different transfer schemes, which they think came from ISIS via Dubai and the northern Nigerian commercial hubs of Kaduna and Kano, in two cases involving significant amounts. These claims are difficult to corroborate, however. Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, 29 November 2019 and 4 February 2022; telephone interviews, 4 December 2020 and 27 July 2021. See also Foucher, "The Islamic State Franchises in Africa", op. cit.

⁵² As a result of the advice, ISWAP notably removed the youngest child soldiers from its ranks, created permanent cantonments for fighters, asked members to choose between being full-time fighters and non-fighting supporters, and increased the duration of training. Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP member, 8 August 2021; interviews, former ISWAP members, Maiduguri, 29 November 2019, 1 March 2020 and 4 March 2020.

⁵³ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP fighters, 1 and 25 July 2021. Intermediaries and commanders under Shekau made fortunes. A former JAS commander recounted that he would steal hundreds of cattle in Cameroon, offer to sell them back to his victims and send Shekau only those cattle that the owners had not rebought. Crisis Group telephone interview, 23 March 2021.

⁵⁴ For a recent example, see "Nigeria: des attaques jihadistes font 27 morts dans le nord-est", AFP, 27 February 2022.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, op. cit.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, February-March 2020 and January 2022.

dominated areas on the shores of Lake Chad said: “They [ISWAP fighters] were just passing by and stopped to tell us about the change. They told us a new man [Habib Yusuf] was in charge and it would be peace [between militants and civilians]”.⁵⁷ In May 2021, Yusuf announced the creation of a commission to review abuses by ISWAP members against civilians, going so far as to sack ISWAP leaders he believed were unduly harsh on civilians.⁵⁸ A civilian who reached out to the commission told Crisis Group he was compensated after being robbed by ISWAP members.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, ISWAP publicised its almsgiving to civilians in honour of the Eid-ul-Fitr religious festival, and has been discussing setting up a humanitarian branch to help those most in need.⁶⁰

ISWAP has also continued to assure civilians they are safe in ISWAP-held territory, and residents of these places report that movements are indeed easier than in government-controlled areas, where security checks can be intrusive and cumbersome.⁶¹ One herder from northern Borno says: “Villagers and natives are back. Places are opening up. They [ISWAP] don’t restrict any more areas”.⁶² A Fulani leader says ISWAP is also keen to offer protection, inviting herders to take their animals to ISWAP-controlled areas of Sambisa, which they had deserted due to harsh treatment by JAS. With Shekau defeated, ISWAP said, herders would be safe there as long as they paid the standard tax (one head of cattle for every 30 every year). Herders confirm that they are largely free from harassment in Sambisa, though they still endure the occasional raid by what they suspect are residual JAS elements lurking around the forest.⁶³

ISWAP’s relatively peaceful cohabitation with the population in the rural areas under its control is a primary marker of and a contributing factor to its success over the last years. As ISWAP expands its governance model to chunks of rural Borno that used to be under Shekau’s control, there are more reports of ISWAP governance activities – taxation, prisons, courts, checkpoints and patrols – in central and southern Borno. It is difficult to know how many civilians are governed by ISWAP, but one may use as a proxy the count of civilians living in “inaccessible” or “hard-to-reach” areas, the euphemisms used by the government and humanitarian organisations to designate rural areas under jihadist control or influence where neither state officials

⁵⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, herder, 20 August 2021.

⁵⁸ The most prominent ISWAP commander to be removed was Mustapha Kirmima, a rival of Yusuf within the organisation. Kirmima, who was known for his violence, had been instrumental in Yusuf’s temporary dismissal from the leadership position in 2019. Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP member, 30 August 2021.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, 11 July 2021.

⁶⁰ Photo set on file with Crisis Group. Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP associate, 17 February 2022. ISWAP’s almsgiving was reported in an issue of *Al-Naba*, the ISIS weekly magazine.

⁶¹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, herder, 20 August 2021; fisherman, 22 September 2021.

⁶² Crisis Group telephone interview, herder, 20 August 2021.

⁶³ Crisis Group telephone interview, 9 November 2021. On ISWAP’s policy toward herders, see Crisis Group Report, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, op. cit.; and Florian Köhler, “Pastoralists and the State... and ‘Islamic State’ on Eastern Niger’s Frontier: Between Evasion and Engagement”, *Nomadic Peoples*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2021), pp. 59-79.

nor aid workers can easily go.⁶⁴ Depending on definitions and data sources, estimates vary from 800,000 to over 3 million.⁶⁵

ISWAP still seems to be enjoying the attention and support of ISIS, though the exact relationship is hard to pin down, especially given the changes in ISIS's situation in Syria and Iraq.⁶⁶ For ISIS, ISWAP has visibly become an asset that it can use for propaganda purposes. For instance, ISWAP featured on twenty of the 52 covers of ISIS's weekly magazine *Al-Naba* in 2021, almost twice as often as ISIS branches in Afghanistan or the core in Iraq-Syria.⁶⁷ Lake Chad is one of few fronts where ISIS can claim to have installed a form of governance, a major feat in its claim to the status of caliphate. Several sources mention visits by ISIS advisers at different moments over the last year, as well as some financial support.⁶⁸ According to former ISWAP associates, ISIS is pushing for more changes, including a more formalised and bureaucratic organisation, longer training for new recruits, increased religious education and a halt to internal purges.⁶⁹ If it succeeds in doing so, ISWAP may become even more resilient and dangerous.

IV. National and Regional Responses

The Nigerian military and its allies have yet to find a reliable and effective way to address the evolving challenge presented by ISWAP. That said, they have made certain changes in their approach.

For one thing, in recent years, the Nigerian military, reeling from attacks such as ISWAP's July 2018 raid on a base in Jilli, in which it lost dozens of soldiers, has essentially adopted a better defensive posture, regrouping its troops in "super-camps" in various northern Borno localities.⁷⁰ This move has reduced military losses but also allowed ISWAP to tighten its grip on portions of rural Borno.

⁶⁴ Some humanitarian organisations distinguish between areas where armed groups have full control and areas where insurgents and government forces are contending for control, the boundaries of which are fluid.

⁶⁵ The count is controversial, however, with authorities insisting that the figure has regularly been going down, a take that humanitarian workers tend to reject, given ISWAP's rural expansion and the relocation of displaced persons away from cities. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, Maiduguri, January-February 2022; correspondence, humanitarian workers, March 2022.

⁶⁶ On these changes, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°207, *Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria*, 11 October 2019; Sam Heller, "When Measuring ISIS's 'Resurgence', Use the Right Standard", Crisis Group Commentary, 13 May 2020; and Jerome Drevon and Dureen Khalifa, "A Death in Idlib: The Killing of the Top ISIS Leader and Its Impact", Crisis Group Commentary, 4 February 2022.

⁶⁷ The count is available in a tweet by Jihad Analytics, @Jihad_Analytics, 6:20am, 24 January 2022. One could add another cover, which is dedicated to Niger, where another pro-ISIS group operates under the ISWAP flag but is functionally distinct.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP associates, 1 July 2021 and 16 January 2022.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP associate, 17 February 2022.

⁷⁰ See "Jilli attack: Nigeria Army suffers heavy casualty, 62 soldiers killed", International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 17 July 2018. On the super-camps, see Jacob Zenn, "The Humanitarian Dilemma Around the Military's 'Super Camp' Strategy in Nigeria", Council on Foreign Relations, 5 September 2019; Stella Wolf, "Nigeria's super-Camps strategy: Early gains, disappointing outcomes", Security Praxis, 26 June 2020. The army abandoned the phrase "super-camps" in April 2021,

Additionally, following promotions to command positions of a new generation of generals with combat experience in Borno, as well as massive investments in weaponry and aircraft (notably the long-awaited anti-guerrilla Super Tucano aircraft, delivered by the U.S. in September 2021), Nigerian authorities have stepped up military operations against ISWAP.⁷¹ The offensive, along with improvements in intelligence, surveillance and airborne reconnaissance capacity, and better coordination between air and ground forces, has ramped up pressure on ISWAP and prevented large-scale jihadist attacks on garrison towns.⁷² These last few months, Super Tucano and other aircraft have repeatedly hit ISWAP fighters as they gathered to launch raids or struck them as they returned.⁷³ Moreover, with a fresh supply of armoured vehicles and artillery, the Nigerian army went on the attack in different parts of Borno in early 2021 and 2022.⁷⁴

Yet it remains in doubt whether the military can establish a lasting presence in rural areas. Former jihadist fighters interviewed by Crisis Group have long said they simply moved away during ground offensives, only to return as soon as troops had left.⁷⁵

As Nigeria has increased military pressure, ISWAP has adapted its tactics accordingly, dropping its large-scale attacks to evade the air raids and focusing on mounting roadblocks to kidnap and kill state officials, hitting military convoys with ambushes and improvised explosive devices, and using artillery fire against garrisons.⁷⁶ Data on casualties are poor, with many incidents unreported and official figures unreliable, but there is no doubt that while ISWAP may be killing fewer soldiers today, it still does a lot of damage.⁷⁷

The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), a coalition of troops from Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger fighting jihadists in the border areas and on the islands of Lake Chad, has meanwhile failed to prevent either ISWAP or the Bakura group from putting down roots in the area it is supposed to control.⁷⁸ Over the years, the two groups have inflicted heavy losses on these countries' armies, ranging from the cap-

but the principle remains. "Another look at Nigeria's super camp strategy two years after", Humangle, 3 May 2021.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Nigerian military officer, Maiduguri, 31 January 2022; correspondence, Nigerian security expert, 14 November 2021.

⁷² In 2022, Chief of Defence Staff Lucky Irabor was still insisting that "intra-agency rivalry" was a problem to be sorted out. "Defence chief moves to end inter-security agency rivalry", *The Guardian*, 23 February 2022.

⁷³ "Super Tucano decimates dozens of ISWAP fighters in Brono [sic]", *Daily Post*, 29 November 2021.

⁷⁴ Paradoxically, the military offensive against JAS in early 2021 probably played a part in weakening the group and making ISWAP's move possible.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former ISWAP and JAS members, Maiduguri, February-March 2020.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, security analysts, Maiduguri, January-February 2022; international security analysts, military experts and diplomats, Abuja, February 2022.

⁷⁷ At his Twitter account, analyst Tomasz Rolbiecki (@TomaszRolbiecki) tracks and tries to investigate incident reports by local media and NGOs as well as by the jihadists.

⁷⁸ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°291, *What Role for the Multinational Joint Task Force in Fighting Boko Haram*, 7 July 2020. The MNJTF enjoys some financial support from the European Union, passed through the African Union, and a small cell of military experts from the UK, the U.S. and France provides assistance, notably in the form of intelligence. The force, headquartered in N'Djamena, focuses on the Lake Chad region, not the rest of Borno. It is organised into four sectors, with each sector manned by national units operating under the MNJTF flag. National command seems to prevail, however, and the MNJTF is more of a coordination mechanism than a command structure.

ture of MNJTF's main base at Baga, on the shores of Lake Chad, in December 2018 to a devastating Bakura attack on Chadian troops in Bohoma in 2020.⁷⁹ The MNJTF carried out few large-scale operations between mid-2020 and late 2021. Then, in December 2021, it launched Operation Sharan Fage, on the Niger-Nigeria border, killing 30 insurgents and destroying training camps.⁸⁰

Part of the reason for the task force's limited results is likely that Nigeria and its neighbours are preoccupied elsewhere. Besides the insurgencies in the north east, Nigeria's forces have to contend with banditry in the north west and instability in the south east.⁸¹ Chad, which has the region's most powerful army, began reducing its engagement with Boko Haram in 2019, months after fresh violence broke out in its northern Tibesti region and prior to the Bakura attack.⁸² N'Djaména backed away farther from MNJTF operations after the outbreak of a flash rebellion in early 2021, which led to the killing of President Idriss Déby.⁸³ Niger's authorities are meanwhile dealing with a surge in violence in the Tillabery region, a stronghold of ISIS's Sahelian franchise.⁸⁴ While Nigeria's and Cameroon's armies still cooperate well against jihadists along their northern borders, Yaoundé's forces are also busy fighting rebels in its Anglophone regions.⁸⁵

The Nigerian government acknowledges that military operations are not enough to defeat ISWAP and has tried other tactics, in particular developing a program to encourage voluntary defections. Operation Safe Corridor offers jihadists a way to hand themselves in to military authorities, undergo what the state calls "de-radicalisation" and then be reinserted into society.⁸⁶ The program has significant limitations, however, including a weak screening process that often sweeps in civilians, terrible conditions of detention prior to entry into the program, delays in and weak support for reintegration, and opposition from politicians and ordinary citizens who see it as an amnesty plan for jihadists. Still, Operation Safe Corridor has improved substantially since its creation in 2016. It has thus far worked with almost 1,000 people, showing insurgents that defecting is possible. Even while potential defectors have expressed concerns about Safe Corridor, the program has encouraged JAS fighters and associated civilians to leave the group after Shekau's death.⁸⁷

Given Safe Corridor's limitations, Borno state authorities have stepped in to deal with the influx of defectors – at least 2,000 among the larger outflow of civilians who

⁷⁹ "Islamic State-linked militants 'seize Nigeria's Baga town'", BBC, 28 December 2018. Crisis Group Commentary, "Behind the Jihadist Attack in Chad", 6 April 2020.

⁸⁰ Comment by a security analyst at a briefing attended by Crisis Group, 23 November 2021. Also "MNJTF: We are taking the battle to the enemy – Force commander", Montage Africa, 14 February 2022.

⁸¹ Crisis Group Report, *Violence in Nigeria's North West*, op. cit.

⁸² Crisis Group Africa Report N°274, *Chad: Avoiding Confrontation in Miski*, 17 May 2019.

⁸³ Richard Moncrieff, Thibaud Lesueur and Claudia Gazzini, "Chad: What Are the Risks after Idriss Déby's Death?", Crisis Group Commentary, 22 April 2021.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group Africa Report N°289, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, 3 June 2020.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group Africa Report N°272, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to Talks?*, 2 May 2019.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group Briefing N°170, *An Exit from Boko Haram? Assessing Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor*, 19 March 2021.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, Nigerian security official, Abuja, 7 February 2022. Regarding the concerns about Safe Corridor, see Crisis Group Briefing, *An Exit from Boko Haram?*, op. cit.

escaped the Sambisa forest.⁸⁸ Governor Babagana Umara Zulum has set up emergency camps in Maiduguri to host them, often together with their families.⁸⁹ Despite these commendable efforts, the camps are overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of new arrivals, meaning that screening to determine who is a civilian and who might be a militant is often rushed and superficial. There is no clear end date for the stay in the camps; reintegration programming is cursory; and some observers say the camp system amounts to a form of detention, as the legal status of the internees is murky.⁹⁰ Conditions of internment are reportedly unsatisfactory.⁹¹ As a result, many JAS fighters are at risk of simply being jettisoned back into society without being adequately prepared for reintegration. Some might be tempted to rejoin one jihadist group or another.

Another major issue for state authorities has been the 1.6 million persons internally displaced by the conflict in Borno (the figure is above three million if one considers the whole of the Lake Chad basin).⁹² The authorities have begun closing down some camps that were hosting some of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Maiduguri, making good on a longstanding pledge. So far, about 140,000 of over one million have been made to leave the Maiduguri camps, and the process is far from complete.⁹³ Some have tried to find shelter in informal settlements in or around Maiduguri, losing their access to humanitarian assistance. Most have left Maiduguri, but few have made it to their communities of origin, which are often in ISWAP-controlled areas, and have had to resettle in the closest state-held urban enclaves. Borno's Governor Zulum has also visited Cameroon and Niger to discuss closing the refugee camps there and speeding up Nigerian citizens' return home.⁹⁴

While the policy stems from a legitimate wish by the state authorities to see citizens regain their livelihoods and to bring an end to what seems like a state of permanent humanitarian emergency – all in the service of “stabilisation” – it may have an unintended downside. The IDPs resettled in the enclaved garrison towns find high food prices and scant job prospects with little to no humanitarian assistance. If, instead, they go to rural areas to try farming, fishing or raising cattle, they may be raided by fighters from Shekau's faction or have to engage with ISWAP and pay taxes, thus becoming a resource for the jihadists. They also risk becoming collateral damage in government air raids or attacks or winding up targeted by ISWAP for allegedly being government collaborators.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Nigerian security official, Abuja, 7 February 2022.

⁸⁹ In Maiduguri, defectors are hosted in three sites, one of which used to be the camp through which Safe Corridor internees transited. The governor has opposed some of Safe Corridor's features, notably its lengthy and quasi-military period of detention, when internees are kept away from their families. Crisis Group telephone interview, humanitarian worker, 26 November 2021.

⁹⁰ In one camp, internees protested what they said was detention against their will. Crisis Group correspondence, expert involved in reintegration programming, 15 November 2021.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, Nigerian security official, Abuja, 7 February 2021.

⁹² “Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) Lake Chad Basin. Monthly Dashboard”, International Organization for Migration, 28 February 2022.

⁹³ The camps closed so far since June 2021 are MOGCOLIS, NYSC, Farm Center, Bakasi, Stadium and Teachers Village. Crisis Group correspondence, humanitarian worker, 13 January 2022.

⁹⁴ In October 2021, he personally took some Nigerians who had sought refuge in Niger to visit the town of Mallam Fatori in Borno in order to prepare them for return.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, female IDPs from Maiduguri, 4 November 2021.

Well before the closure of the IDP camps, Borno's state government had implicitly accepted that some civilians, notably herders, would engage with ISWAP to sustain their livelihoods, since it lifted bans on economic activity and trade imposed in 2015 and 2016 to curb Boko Haram's revenue-generating capacity.⁹⁶ But with the resettlements, the scale of civilians who may be re-engaging with ISWAP is unprecedented and the military is not as flexible as Borno's authorities about civilian engagement with ISWAP. There have been reports of raids by the military on markets, as well as on groups of fishermen and herders operating in rural areas.⁹⁷ Attacks on civilian targets that lack a legitimate military objective are violations of international law.

V. Confronting ISWAP

Given the security challenges that Nigeria and Lake Chad states presently face, military victory over ISWAP seems out of reach for now. The authorities in Abuja should instead aim to contain ISWAP's advances and deny the group the opportunity to expand further, while the region should strengthen its security and intelligence co-operation to curb illicit money flows to ISWAP.

The first major problem to reckon with is how to deal with JAS defectors so they remain out of the fight. Federal and Borno state authorities need to focus on the demobilisation of these individuals, lest they join the Bakura group or ISWAP or become bandits or militants in different parts of the north, causing further insecurity. Federal and military authorities and the Borno state government thus need to work with each other more closely to develop a coherent process, taking into account the experience acquired in Operation Safe Corridor. It is essential to screen out JAS defectors from among those arriving at the emergency camps set up by the governor and channel them into solid reintegration programs that ensure they do not relapse into violence. Federal authorities should urgently assign more resources and personnel to these camps. Donors who have been involved in Operation Safe Corridor should assist.

Defectors who are assessed as low risk could then be integrated quickly back into society with some socio-economic assistance, preferably in the relative safety of Maiduguri, which is well protected by security forces. Both international partners and the federal government should help Borno authorities with that task. Those who require longer-term support, whether in disengaging them from idea of jihad or teaching them new means of earning a living, should be channelled into Safe Corridor or another program with adequate federal funding to handle large numbers of internees properly and safely.

⁹⁶ Cattle raised in ISWAP areas and taxed by ISWAP now find their way to markets in Maiduguri or in central and southern Nigeria, with official taxes and informal handouts paid to a variety of state and security officials who are part of facilitating the trade. Crisis Group telephone interviews, cattle traders, market officials and herders, March-April 2021. The same will probably obtain for fish caught in Lake Chad as authorities have allowed activity in the major fishing town of Baga Doron to pick up. Crisis Group correspondence, Fulani leader, 2 October 2021.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, Fulani leader, 14 February 2022; correspondence, security analyst, January 2022. See also "Troops kill three at Boko Haram terrorists' market in Borno", News Agency of Nigeria, 8 January 2022.

Secondly and relatedly, federal military and intelligence authorities should convene Borno and Nigeria's other northern state governments to step up efforts to reach out to former JAS fighters who may have moved outside the Lake Chad area. As they attempt to locate militants in other parts of the north, the federal authorities should start devising a public information campaign to encourage possible defectors outside the basin to surrender. Of course, for these efforts to be effective it will be important for the government to have sufficient capacity to place these individuals with reintegration programs as appropriate and develop a track record that breeds confidence in those programs.

Thirdly, while it is understandable that Borno's authorities seek to close IDP camps after almost a decade of delivering humanitarian assistance, and send IDPs and refugees home, they should review their stabilisation policy. Returning the displaced to enclaves under government control risks exposing them to ISWAP or putting them in the crossfire. While returns are feasible in certain areas, they are simply not yet possible in others. Some camps must therefore be kept open for IDPs who prefer to stay there, so that they are out of harm's way when military operations, including aerial campaigns, pick up, and so that ISWAP is denied the opportunity to exploit them for trade and taxes. As with new defectors, efforts should be made to allow displaced persons to settle more permanently in or around Maiduguri, and they should be encouraged to participate in the local economy. Both international partners and the federal authorities should help Borno authorities in that endeavour.

Fourthly, while the military's frustration with ISWAP's resource-generating methods is understandable, civilians who engage with ISWAP in order to work their fields, maintain their herds or trade at local markets should not be treated as criminals. While security forces may need to close down trade routes and markets temporarily in urgent circumstances, they should not target these places for destruction. On a more general note, while the military's air capacity is a crucial resource, it should be used with discrimination – taking great pains to avoid civilians and civilian objects – all the more as the Nigerian military does not have trained spotters who can guide air-strikes with precision.

Finally, ISIS's support plays a role in ISWAP's success, helping it improve its operations and manage its internal tensions. Authorities must step up efforts to curb this assistance, in all the forms it takes, from remote advice to visits by ISIS envoys to financial transfers. To the end, the MNJTF countries and their international partners will need to redouble their intelligence efforts and better share information with one another.

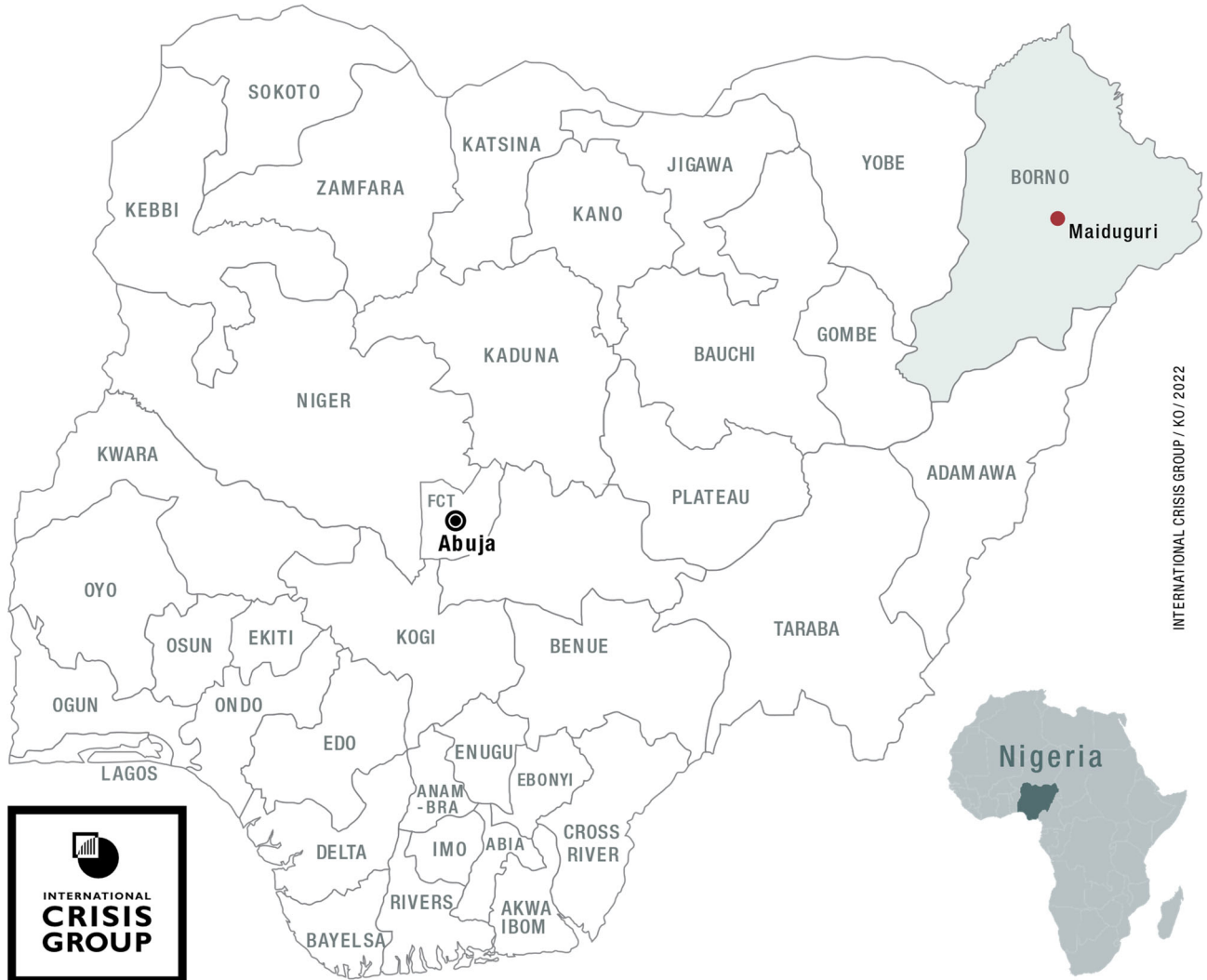
VI. Conclusion

The death of Abubakar Shekau, a man responsible for gruesome violence and abuse against civilians, was greeted with relief in official circles in Nigeria and beyond. But while it marked an end to Shekau's reign, it has also marked the beginning of a new chapter for ISIS's local franchise. Although ISWAP certainly faces challenges to its authority, primarily from the Bakura group, it is clearly consolidating its grip on Borno and the Lake Chad region, posing a growing security threat to Nigeria and neighbouring countries.

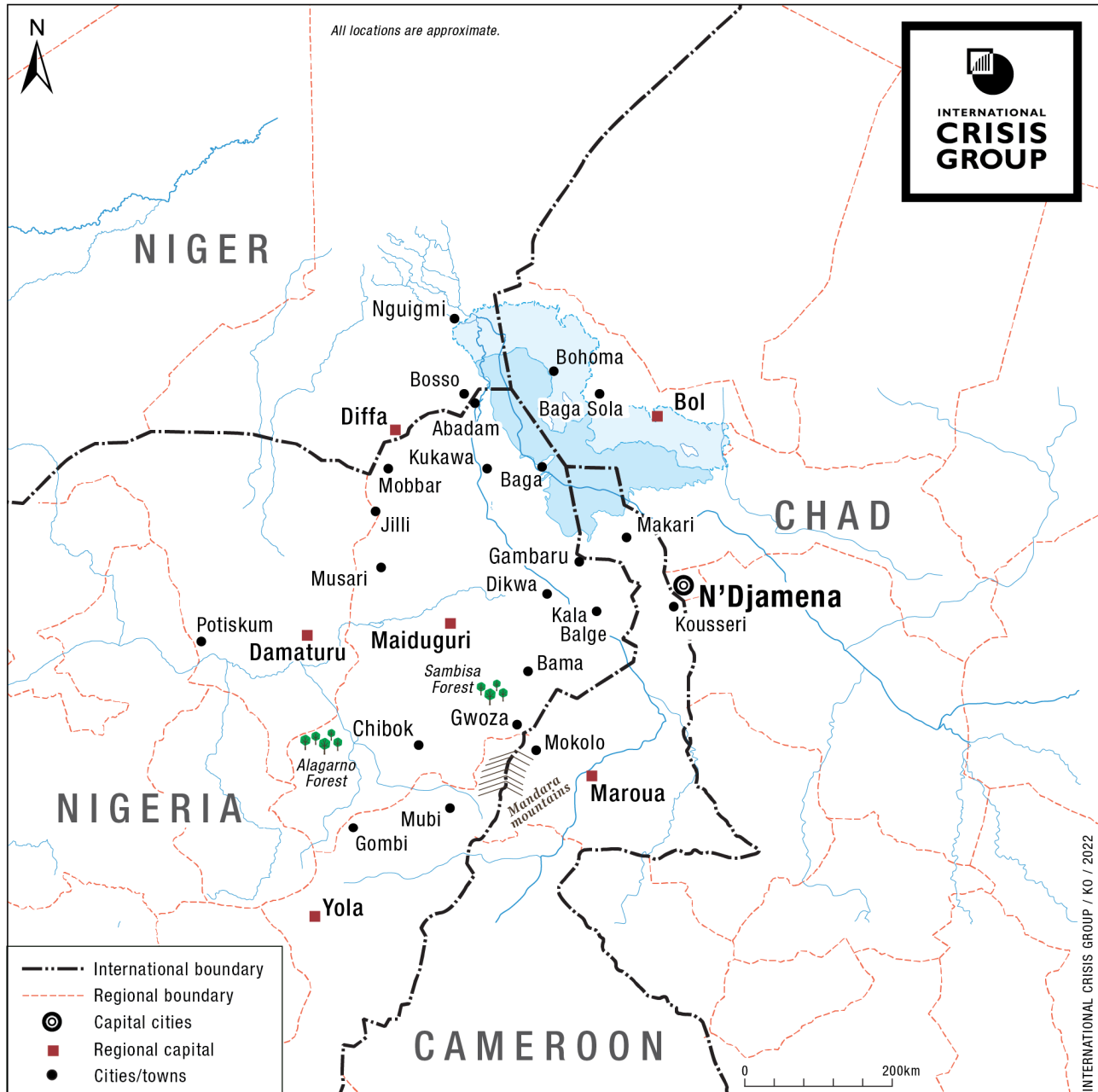
While it seems unlikely that Abuja and its partners will quickly reverse ISWAP's recent gains, they should work to contain further advances. They should take steps to halt militants formerly under Shekau's control from spreading instability elsewhere. Abuja should also provide better alternatives for civilians who might return to ISWAP-controlled territory, where they would risk becoming a tax base for the jihadists and collateral damage in their fight with Nigerian soldiers. The military will need to continue its campaign, but as it proceeds it should take due care to protect civilians. Getting a leg up on ISWAP militarily will be challenging, but dealing with these issues could make it an easier proposition.

Dakar/Brussels, 29 March 2022

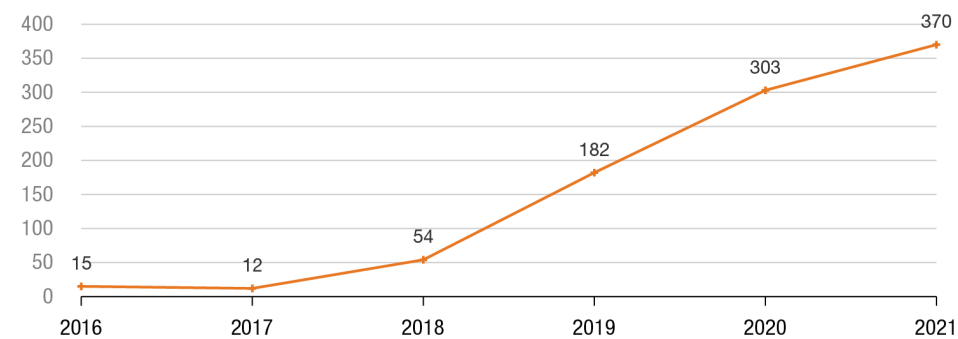
Appendix A: Map of Nigeria



Appendix B: Map of the Lake Chad Basin

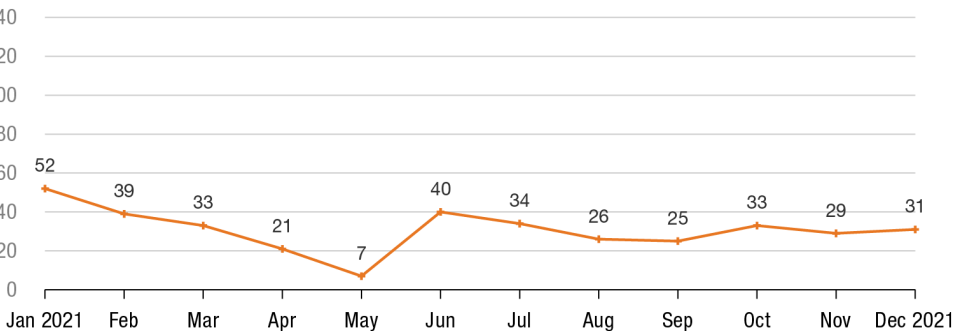


Appendix C: ISWAP Attack Claims per Year



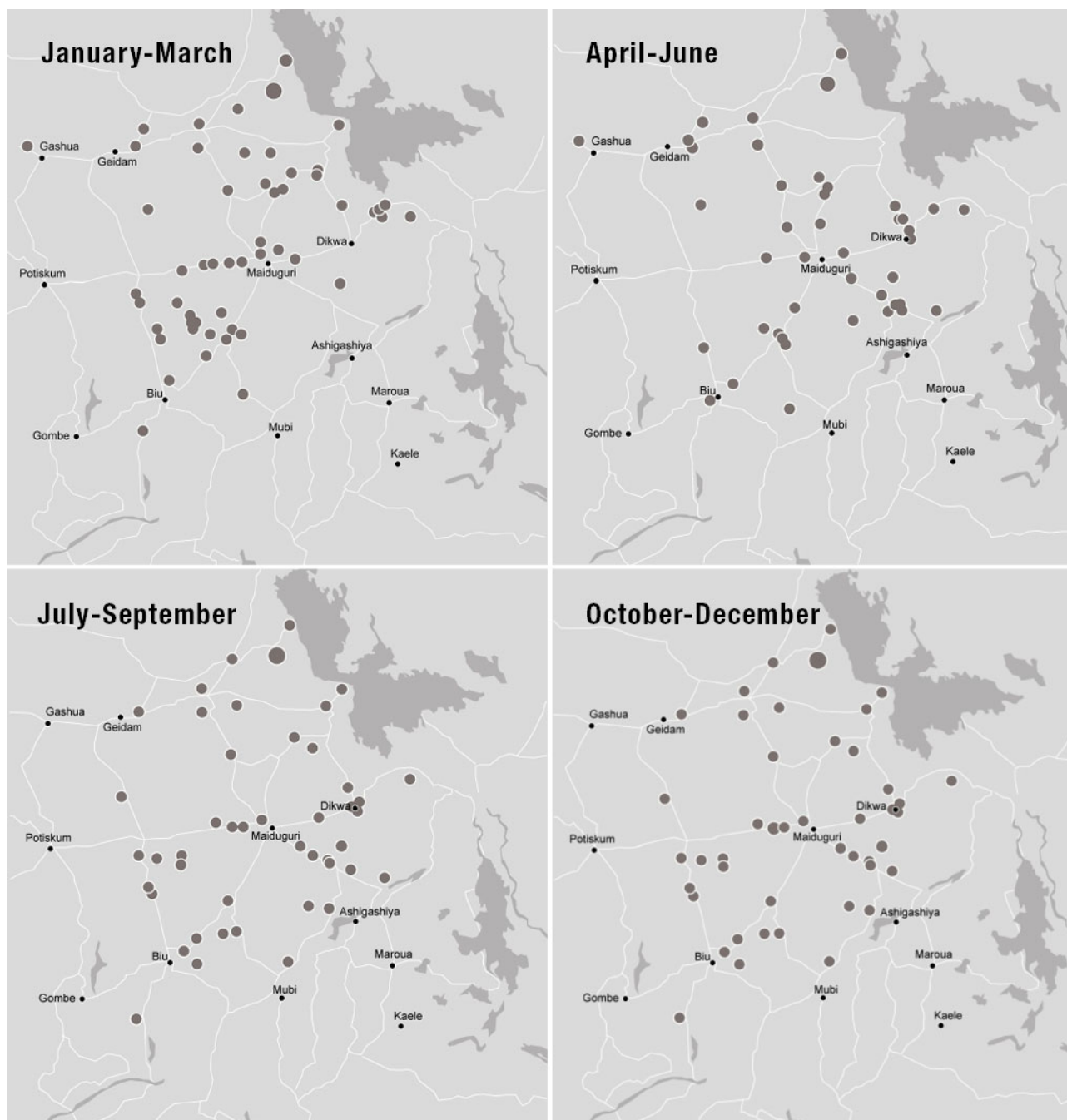
Source: Jihad Analytics.

Appendix D: ISWAP Claims per Month for 2021



Source: Jihad Analytics.

Appendix E: Maps of Attacks Claimed by ISWAP per Quarter of 2021



Description: Circle size reflects frequency of attack in a location. Source: Jihad Analytics.



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