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JAS vs. ISWAP: The War of the Boko Haram Splinters

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What's new? Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) has gained ground in the intra-jihadist fighting in north-eastern Nigeria, halting the previous momentum of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). In the course of 2023, JAS took most of the islands in Lake Chad, which ISWAP had controlled.

Why did it happen? Conflict between these Boko Haram splinters stems from differences in governance and treatment of civilians. JAS kills and steals from everyone; the more bureaucratic ISWAP generally spares Muslim non-combatants. Many JAS members surrendered to authorities or continued fighting instead of joining ISWAP after the death of JAS's leader in 2021.

Why does it matter? In the last two years, JAS and ISWAP may have visited more damage upon each other than the Lake Chad states have inflicted on the jihadists. Still, the splinters pose a significant threat. ISWAP is regrouping, while the revamped JAS is set to target civilians around the lake.

What should be done? The Lake Chad governments will need to do more to prevail over the jihadists. They should mitigate risks to civilians by maintaining humanitarian assistance; expanding efforts to support defectors; improving airstrike precision; and reinvigorating regional security cooperation.

I. Overview

The balance of power between Boko Haram's two splinters in north-eastern Nigeria has shifted once more. Despite the death of its leader Abubakar Shekau in 2021, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS, which is often referred to as Boko Haram) has gone on the offensive, taking most of the Lake Chad islands occupied by its rival, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), in the last year. ISWAP had held the upper hand in the intra-jihadist war, but has now lost ground, in part because JAS fighters resisted submitting to its rules. The two groups have bruised each other badly, but the Lake Chad states should not think their own battle with the insurgents is won. Together, the militant groups still command thousands of fighters and pose a significant threat. ISWAP is reorganising in other parts of north-eastern Nigeria, while JAS is preying upon civilians around Lake Chad and from its other stronghold in the Mandara mountains. In addition to stepping up military campaigns, govern-

ments should improve services, increase humanitarian assistance to affected communities and invest more in defection programs.

The original Boko Haram emerged in the 2000s, participating in a series of failed urban uprisings in Nigeria's north east in 2009. Afterward, the group reassembled under Shekau, taking the name JAS. It then evolved from an urban insurgency using terror attacks into a rural guerrilla movement. JAS fighters proceeded to seize control of a substantial part of Borno state and to move into other north-eastern states, as well as the border regions of Nigeria's neighbours around Lake Chad – Niger, Chad and Cameroon. In 2015, Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the movement took the name of ISWAP. It was riven by internal divisions, however, and in 2016 Shekau's critics broke away, with that secessionist splinter both keeping the ISWAP name and securing recognition from ISIS. Shekau and his followers organised themselves in a separate faction, reverting to the JAS designation.

After Shekau was defeated in battle by ISWAP and died by his own hand in 2021, ISWAP's continued rise seemed certain, but since then dynamics have changed. The fighting between JAS and ISWAP has weakened both groups. In early 2022, ISWAP seemed to have the momentum. It even launched its first-ever campaign in central Nigeria, culminating in a major attack on a prison near the federal capital, Abuja. From the end of 2022, however, under a new leader, Bakura Doro, JAS has pushed back hard against ISWAP, chasing it from many Lake Chad islands and seizing supplies. A Lake Chad-based ISWAP sub-group defected to JAS in early 2023. According to former members of both factions, ISWAP and JAS have lost more fighters sparring with each other since 2021 than in confrontations with state militaries. ISWAP is now focusing on consolidating its control in other parts of Borno. For a time, it suspended its attacks in central Nigeria, though an incident in January suggests that these may be starting back up.

The conflict between JAS and ISWAP has to do with a fundamental disagreement over how to treat civilians. Whereas JAS sees all civilians as fair game for plunder, ISWAP treats Muslims differently from non-Muslims. It has tried to improve relations with Muslim civilians, taxing them and providing its version of law and order, rather than simply stealing from them, as JAS does. Upon taking over the area that JAS previously controlled in the Sambisa forest, ISWAP imposed its more bureaucratic model on JAS fighters, banning pillage and seizing weapons. With their livelihoods thus threatened, many JAS fighters refused to join ISWAP. Some chose to surrender to the Nigerian authorities, while others fought back. Now the JAS counterattack has fed tensions within ISWAP, leading to defections. Estimates are that, since 2021, several thousand fighters have quit the two factions combined.

While regional governments may see the conflict between the two jihadist factions as good news, it comes both with risks and with consequences for human security. Both groups still have thousands of fighters and hold swathes of territory. The two have parleyed a number of times and, though it seems unlikely, they might still reach a ceasefire or cooperation deal, taking the conflict in a new direction. But even if they keep fighting each other, and losses remain low for the militaries of the four Lake Chad states, civilians in rural areas are still highly exposed to jihadist violence. With JAS now confidently in control of much of Lake Chad and the Mandara mountains, it will likely intensify its predation, including in Cameroon, Niger and Chad. Its comeback could entice some of the thousands of JAS fighters who have surrendered to

take up arms again. As for ISWAP, it will probably keep trying to tighten its grip on central Borno and eastern Yobe state, likely increasing pressure on civilians there. It also still has networks outside north-eastern Nigeria.

Authorities in Nigeria and the other Lake Chad states cannot afford to shift their gaze from the dangers the evolving conflict poses to the population. The Nigerian government says it is time for reconstruction, but this hint at victory being nigh is premature. Given that fighting is likely to persist for some time, regional authorities and outside partners should bolster efforts to blunt the impact on civilians and offer combatants an alternative to conflict. They should expand rather than phase out humanitarian assistance, while also developing better targeting protocols to avoid civilian casualties in airstrikes. They should also improve and expand programs for supporting defectors. Finally, regional cooperation with respect to security on the islands and shores of Lake Chad has fallen off in recent years; it is time for an effort to reinvigorate the Multinational Joint Task Force comprising Nigeria and its Lake Chad neighbours.

II. Bakura Rising: The State of the Nigerian Jihad

JAS is on the rebound, opening a new chapter in the conflict in north-eastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad basin.¹ In May 2021, it seemed that ISWAP was about to defeat JAS: ISWAP fighters invaded JAS's main base in the Sambisa forest of central Borno, provoking the suicide of its leader, Abubakar Shekau.² In an unexpected turn, JAS not only absorbed this blow but also grew stronger under the leadership of Bakura Doro, an experienced commander. Since the end of 2022, JAS has pushed back hard against ISWAP, taking control of most of the Lake Chad area, notably its islands. Rifts within ISWAP have correspondingly widened.

A. Jihad and Factionalism in the Lake Chad Basin

The jihadist organisation often designated as Boko Haram was born from a social movement that developed in the late 1990s and 2000s around Mohamed Yusuf, a popular Salafi preacher from Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state in north-eastern Nigeria.³ In the late 2000s, Yusuf's movement, usually called the Yusufiyya, began confronting the authorities. In 2009, it launched an uprising in Maiduguri and a few other north-eastern towns, killing members of the Nigerian security forces. The revolt was bloodily suppressed, with hundreds of Yusufiyya followers killed, and Yusuf was shot dead by the police.⁴

¹ Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad means "people committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and jihad". It is the official name of Boko Haram (generally translated from Hausa as "Western education is illicit"), a derisive term critics of Mohamed Yusuf coined to mock his hostility to aspects of Western education.

² On Shekau's death, see Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°180, *After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria's North East*, 29 March 2022.

³ On the insurgency's beginnings, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°168, *Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict*, 20 December 2010.

⁴ Ibid.

Some of Yusuf's followers reorganised around a close associate, Shekau, and under the name of JAS (though still widely known as Boko Haram) initiated an insurgent campaign from 2010, receiving support from al-Qaeda. As described in prior Crisis Group work, the organisation began attacking state officials and hostile religious leaders, eventually moving to plunder villages and bomb markets and churches, as well as mosques it deemed "infidel". In April 2014, it kidnapped 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, Borno state. This mass abduction, which earned it global condemnation, was only one in a series of incidents of striking brutality.⁵ Displeased with Shekau's endorsement of extreme violence against Muslim civilians, a small network of militants established outside Borno broke away in 2011 to create their own faction, Ansaru, securing al-Qaeda's support.⁶

In 2015, Shekau pledged allegiance to the ISIS "caliph", and JAS took the name ISWAP. But another factional rift appeared in 2016, when a number of senior ISWAP leaders, critical of Shekau, decided to secede.⁷ Under the leadership of Mohamed Yusuf's son Habib, the new faction based itself on the islands and shores of Lake Chad. In August 2016, ISIS officially recognised Habib Yusuf (alias Abu Musab al-Barnawi), as the *wali* (governor) of ISWAP. (He stepped down in 2019, for reasons discussed in Section III.B below, but returned two years later.) Shekau then reverted to the JAS designation.

B. *The Rise of Bakura*

Tensions between JAS and ISWAP remained high. Until May 2021, ISWAP was content with fighting off JAS raids on its territory. It stayed away from Shekau's stronghold in the Sambisa forest. But in May 2021, with Habib Yusuf back at the helm and with ISIS support, ISWAP overran Sambisa in a matter of days. When its fighters cornered Shekau on 19 May, he detonated a suicide vest, killing himself.

JAS groups reacted differently to Shekau's death. In the Sambisa forest, many JAS fighters joined ISWAP, though a first wave surrendered to the Nigerian government. Others resisted, especially those in territories made safe by their topography and distance from the Sambisa forest: the islands in the northern part of Lake Chad and the Mandara mountains along the border with Cameroon.⁸ In the islands, Sahalaba, a cleric whom Shekau had reportedly designated as his successor in his will, took over as imam of JAS, making him its top leader. But another man, Bakura Doro, led the JAS elements who kept fighting on the ground.⁹

⁵ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°137, *Preventing Boko Haram Abductions of Schoolchildren in Nigeria*, 12 April 2018.

⁶ For rare analysis of Ansaru, which probably oversells its supposed recent resurgence, see Jacob Zenn and Caleb Weiss, "Ansaru Resurgent: The Rebirth of Al-Qaeda's Nigerian Franchise", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 15, no. 5 (October 2021).

⁷ Crisis Group Africa Report N°273, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, 16 May 2019.

⁸ See the map in Appendix B. Sahalaba is sometimes referred to as Bakura Sahalaba, leading to confusion with Bakura Doro. For the sake of clarity, this briefing refers to Bakura Sahalaba as Sahalaba and Bakura Doro as Bakura.

⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former JAS fighters, 24 January 2023. Another notable JAS commander is Aliyu Ngulde, the *amir ul-fiya* in the Mandara mountains, who follows Bakura.

Little information is available about Bakura Doro, but from what is known, he is typical of the Yusufiyya rank and file. He was born and raised in Doron Baga, a lively market town in northern Borno. He was involved in the informal economy, and he joined the Yusufiyya before the 2009 uprising. He lacks the depth of religious knowledge that the organisation prefers in its leaders, but after the conflict began, he rose to the rank of *munzir*, a mid-level commander, with a reputation for shrewdness and independence. In 2016, when Boko Haram broke in two, he refused to follow Habib Yusuf into ISWAP, resettling on the northern shores of Lake Chad and securing Shekau's recognition as *amir ul-fiya* (zone commander) in that area. He was thus well positioned to assume Shekau's mantle.

Right after Shekau's death, in June 2021, Bakura launched the first of several raids on ISWAP-controlled islands in the centre and south of Lake Chad.¹⁰ On several occasions, his troops overran these sites, killing fighters and capturing women and children.¹¹ ISWAP pushed back each time and launched its own attacks on JAS fighters in the vicinity of Lake Chad and elsewhere.¹² Closer to Sambisa, in the Nigerian local government areas of Konduga, Dikwa, Mafa and Bama, bands of JAS fighters resisted ISWAP's advances starting from August 2021.¹³ The back-and-forth between the two factions was inconclusive.

On three occasions at least, with the encouragement of ISIS, the two groups parleyed. They negotiated a ceasefire and tried to reach a broader deal, without success.¹⁴ Sahalaba apparently favoured reconciliation with ISWAP, and this aspiration, along with Bakura's ambitions, cost him his life. In March 2022, Bakura had him killed, taking over the JAS imamate.¹⁵

C. ISWAP's Growing Pains

In the second half of 2021 and into 2022, ISWAP kept expanding. From Sambisa, it launched a wave of attacks in Cameroon, putting the Cameroonian army on the defensive.¹⁶ Then, early in 2022, ISWAP made its first raids in Nigeria outside the north east.¹⁷ This campaign reached a peak that July, when ISWAP militants stormed a ma-

¹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP fighter, 21 September 2023.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former JAS fighters, 15 June, 1 July and 22 September 2023.

¹⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former JAS fighters, 3 December 2022, 15 January 2023 and 23 January 2024.

¹⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former JAS fighters, 24 January 2023. Videos of various JAS groups pledging allegiance to Bakura circulated in May 2022. See tweet by Vincent Foucher, researcher, @VincentFoucher, 9:15am, 12 May 2022.

¹⁶ On the brief uptick in ISWAP attacks in Cameroon, see Appendix C. The Cameroonian army withdrew from some of its front-line positions, regrouping in larger towns farther from the border. Crisis Group telephone interview, Cameroonian NGO official, 11 September 2023.

¹⁷ Abu Ikrima, from the Ebira ethnic group in Kogi state in central Nigeria, reportedly led the attempt. Abu Ikrima, an early Yusufiyya supporter, refused to follow Shekau in 2011 and instead joined Ansaru. In 2016, after Ansaru weakened and ISWAP rejected Shekau, Abu Ikrima joined ISWAP. Suspicious, ISWAP detained him for several years. It released him in 2021, provided him with money and sent experienced operatives to assist him. Abu Ikrima's moves among factions attests to the possibility of internal reconfigurations. Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP fighters, 26 June 2023; former ISWAP official, 8 November 2023.

jor prison in Kuje, a suburb of Abuja, the federal capital. They sprang dozens of militants, a number of whom joined ISWAP.¹⁸ Some of the escapees helped ISWAP win over members of al-Qaeda-aligned Ansaru.¹⁹

ISWAP's expansion stalled in December 2022, however, when Bakura launched a new assault on the group.²⁰ This time, he won a major victory. In a matter of months, his forces took control of several Lake Chad islands, including ISWAP's headquarters in Tumbun Alura and its main market in Tumbun Gini. JAS killed several senior ISWAP leaders and seized weapons, grain, fuel and other supplies.²¹ JAS then captured more islands, including Kurnawa, Mallam Yahu, Tumbun Mota, Duguri and Shuwaram.²² In June 2023, Fulani cattle rearers reported seeing JAS fighters as far south as the vicinity of Baga, on the Nigerian side of Lake Chad, which had been uncontested ISWAP territory since 2017.²³

Things got worse for ISWAP. Its leaders left the islands to take refuge in Dogon Chuku, on the western bank of Lake Chad. Then, a sub-group under the command of Kaila, an *amir ul-fiya*, left ISWAP in early 2023. Kaila's band joined Bakura and the two attacked ISWAP in Dogon Chuku.²⁴ The sortie failed but led ISWAP to move its leadership further inland.²⁵ ISWAP's counter-attacks on the Lake Chad islands have been unsuccessful, though it has held on to the shores down to the lake's southern tip, from Baga to Gamboru Ngala.

Kaila's defection – a significant blow to ISWAP – may have owed partly to the group's strict rules about personal comportment. ISWAP had sent him to the front to fight Bakura because of his knowledge of the lake and his reputation for bravery in battle. But after the leadership decided to arrest one of his deputies, reportedly for using opioids, Kaila started to become disaffected.²⁶ After ISWAP released his lieutenant, Kaila made new demands of the group, including payment of salaries, a degree of immunity for his fighters from pursuit by ISWAP's judiciary and all the loot his band took in combat (*ghanima*). ISWAP refused, likely out of a sense that these concessions would have empowered the sub-group at the leadership's expense. So when JAS threatened to attack Kaila unless he pledged allegiance to Bakura, he was ready to switch sides.²⁷

¹⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP fighters, 20 and 27 June 2023.

¹⁹ A key facilitator was Abubakar Katsina, a Yusufiyya veteran who joined Ansaru during his time in jail and then ISWAP after his release. Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP official, 8 November 2023.

²⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former JAS fighter, 5 October 2023; former ISWAP fighter, 27 September 2023.

²¹ Because the Central Bank of Nigeria was planning to issue new currency to replace the old bills, ISWAP had purchased a lot of supplies. Its stores in Tumbun Alura were well provisioned when Bakura took over. Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP fighter, 27 September 2023.

²² Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP official, 8 November 2023.

²³ Crisis Group telephone interview, Fulani community leader, 6 June 2023.

²⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP fighters, 10 May and 27 June 2023.

²⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP fighter, 27 September 2023. See map in Appendix B.

²⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP fighter, 26 September 2023. Crisis Group correspondence, NGO security analyst, 9 October 2023.

²⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP fighter, 27 September 2023.

An ethnic factor may also help explain Kaila's decision. He reportedly has strong ties to the Buduma people, who live on and around Lake Chad, and many of whom have joined ISWAP and JAS to protect their families and livelihoods.²⁸ Former jihadists often describe Kaila as a Buduma himself, though those close to him say he is a Kanuri whose lifelong experience on the lake put him in close contact with the Buduma.²⁹ In any case, Kaila's Buduma connections make him a good ally for Bakura, who leads a faction that is heavily – though not exclusively – Buduma.³⁰

D. *ISWAP – Down But Not Out*

Several signs confirm that ISWAP has been under serious strain, though it is hardly defeated. In addition to Kaila's defection, 2023 brought a big drop in claimed ISWAP attacks. On average, ISWAP took responsibility for 26 attacks every month in 2020, 30 in 2021 and 38 in 2022 – a continuous rise – but for only 21 in the first nine months of 2023 combined.³¹ ISWAP's campaign outside the north east, moreover, sputtered to only four attacks over the entire year.³² Before 2023, few ISWAP members surrendered to authorities – as opposed to the massive numbers of JAS fighters in 2021 and 2022 after Shekau's death. In 2023, however, a number of ISWAP militants turned themselves in, both in Nigeria and in neighbouring Niger.³³

By contrast, in 2023, JAS's fortunes improved. Defections from JAS diminished to a trickle.³⁴ Bakura also managed to forge links to a sub-group of militants who had rejected his decision to kill Sahalaba and take over as imam.³⁵ This band, sometimes called Dar al-Gazuwa because it is based near Gazuwa, a village in Bama local government area, had tried to fight on its own. In 2023, it dispersed and divided, with some of its fighters rejoining Bakura's faction.³⁶ In the second half of 2023, ISWAP repeatedly tried to push back JAS near Lake Chad, but with little success.³⁷

²⁸ Some JAS and ISWAP fighters view the Buduma with suspicion because they do not mix with other groups.

²⁹ Bakura's ethnicity is uncertain, but most Crisis Group interlocutors insisted that he is not Buduma. Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP fighters, 10 May, 20 May and 26 September 2023; former JAS fighter, 5 October 2023.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, former JAS fighters, Maiduguri, 23 March and 15 June 2023; telephone interview, former JAS fighter, 23 September 2023.

³¹ For tracking of monthly attack claims by ISWAP since 2020, see the graph in Appendix C.

³² See the graph in Appendix D. ISWAP claimed only four attacks outside the north east in the first nine months of 2023: on a church in Lokoja, Kogi state in January; on an election office in Okehi, Kogi state in February; on a checkpoint in Edo state in April; and on Christians in Jigawa state in April. In May 2023, in the town of Keffi, Nasarawa state, Nigerian forces stormed a hideout, and an official confirmed media reports saying they busted up an ISWAP cell. Crisis Group correspondence, Nigerian security official, 11 October 2023. "Security agents storm terrorists' hideout in Keffi, as hoodlums detonate bomb", *News Band*, 30 May 2023.

³³ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP and JAS fighters, January–October 2023. Crisis Group correspondence, researchers, September–October 2023.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Critics said Bakura's lack of Islamic knowledge was a serious problem for his leadership. Sahalaba was a cleric and a *qadi* (judge ruling based on sharia). Crisis Group telephone interviews, former JAS fighters, 15 and 23 January, 15 June and 22 September 2023.

³⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, former JAS fighter, 23 September 2023.

³⁷ For information on fighting in the Lake Chad basin, see Tomasz Rolbiecki's Lake Chad Basin Weekly Security Updates.

ISWAP did, however, consolidate its control elsewhere. It fought off JAS groups farther south, in the swathe of land between the lake and the Sambisa forest, in the local government areas of Marte, Bama, Mafa, Konduga and Dikwa.³⁸ It also intensified its operations in the Borno and in eastern Yobe state. In the last two months of 2023, its claimed attacks were up significantly from earlier in the year – with 39 in November and 44 in December.³⁹ ISWAP also resumed flexing its muscle outside Borno. In November, it took responsibility for no fewer than five raids in Cameroon, including on military outposts.⁴⁰ In January 2024, it claimed an attack in Nasarawa state, in central Nigeria, a dozen kilometres from Abuja.⁴¹ Four Christian civilians were killed on this occasion. A former ISWAP official reports hearing of senior group members being sent on missions outside Nigeria's north east in late 2023.⁴² An analyst says the group may have benefited from the assistance of recent recruits from Ansaru for operations in central Nigeria.⁴³

III. How JAS is Fighting Back and Winning (for Now)

The JAS-ISWAP rivalry is, in effect, a power struggle between competing organisational models.⁴⁴ ISWAP's model, which is more bureaucratic, may seem more efficient and sustainable than JAS's. It is also more controlling, however, and many JAS fighters do not accept it. Many are fighting back, and the unexpected resistance has in turn fed tensions within ISWAP.

A. Key Differences: Treatment of Civilians and Organisational Structure

The two jihadist groups differ in their treatment of civilians and organisational structure. JAS operates on the basis of extreme violence, plunder and sectarianism, sanctioning suicide attacks on civilians, massacres and enslavement of people it deems "infidels" or "apostates". Meanwhile, ISWAP has tried to roll out a less brutal approach, limiting violence against Muslim civilians (others have no protection) and favouring "taxation" over mere pillage.⁴⁵

³⁸ "ISWAP guns down Boko Haram commander in Sambisa", *Daily Post*, 2 October 2023.

³⁹ See Appendix C.

⁴⁰ See Appendix D, as well as Rolbiecki, Lake Chad Basin Weekly Security Update, 13-19 November 2023.

⁴¹ Rolbiecki, Lake Chad Basin Weekly Security Update, 25 December 2023-7 January 2024.

⁴² Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP official, 27 December 2023.

⁴³ Crisis Group correspondence, analyst, 3 November 2023.

⁴⁴ A recent UN report assessed that ISWAP has 4,000-7,000 fighters, while JAS was deemed to have 1,000 fighters on Lake Chad and another 500-1,000 in the Mandara mountains. "Thirty-third Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2610 (2021) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities", UN, 29 January 2024. It is difficult, however, to know what to make of these numbers, which are based on feedback from unidentified member states with no indication as to the assessment methods used. Figures about JAS and ISWAP are fundamentally uncertain because both groups count members (*rijal*) who are not full-time fighters. They are traders, farmers, craftsmen, Quranic teachers and others whom the groups may call upon to take part in defending their strongholds from attack. The recent deaths in battle, defections and surrenders make estimates even trickier.

⁴⁵ ISWAP's less violent approach toward Muslim civilians helped in its initial success. Crisis Group Report, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, op. cit. But ISWAP has

ISWAP and JAS also differ over the relative power of military leaders, on one hand, and political and religious leaders, on the other. To sustain its reformed model, with ISIS's advice, ISWAP has standardised its operations.⁴⁶ It is more controlling of fighters than JAS is, and it uses computers and paperwork to keep track of them and their activities.⁴⁷ It has a bureaucracy and a department dedicated to internal security, the *rijal amn*, modelled on ISIS. It registers its members and regulates the size of fighting units. It can move around fighters and staff, irrespective of their personal ties to commanders. It keeps a central arsenal and forbids fighters from keeping weapons with them while not on operations. It provides sustenance to its personnel, and it has tried to pay salaries several times. In ISWAP, religious leaders and bureaucrats hold a lot of power.⁴⁸

In contrast, JAS is less bureaucratic and centralised. Military leaders are more independent, and the top leadership has much less influence over them. To their fighters, military commanders act more as patrons than as officers in an army. Also, JAS fighters get to keep their guns at all times. JAS commanders do consult the leadership, and they can send resources to and receive weapons from it. But they are much freer to do what they like, particularly in robbing civilians, without formal approval. JAS fighters say this licence makes the group more attractive than ISWAP.⁴⁹

Preying on civilians has been the major point of contention between the two factions. In line with their interpretations of Islamic law, both groups draw a distinction between loot taken outside combat (*fey'u*, in Arabic) and booty of war (*ghanima*). The two groups treat *ghanima* similarly: fighters are supposed to keep four fifths of its value and the rest goes to the leadership. Since it is mostly military equipment, both sets of leaders tend to take it all with the understanding that they will pay fighters the equivalent value in cash.⁵⁰ The fault line between the two factions concerns *fey'u*, which refers to goods stolen from civilians.

Here, the differences are stark. ISWAP forbids the taking of *fey'u* from Muslim civilians, even those who have not pledged allegiance to the group. JAS considers non-affiliated Muslim civilians to be apostates, and it authorises taking *fey'u* from them. JAS commanders keep most of the *fey'u*, transferring none or only a small portion to the top leadership. Lower-level fighters often go on raids on their own, though at risk of punishment if caught.⁵¹ JAS raids are not just about goods or money: JAS kidnaps girls and women, and commanders have been known to reward loyal

committed – and sometimes claimed responsibility for – massacres of civilians whom it considered to have violated its strictures. The reasons it gave include refusing to pay taxes, spying for the government or resisting its rule. Also, in line with ISIS practice, it considers the massacre and enslavement of non-Muslims legitimate.

⁴⁶ Maman Inoua Elhadji Mahamadou Amadou and Vincent Foucher, "Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin: The Bakura Faction and Its Resistance to the Rationalisation of Jihad", Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Policy Brief, 8 December 2022.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP fighter, 17 August 2022.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP official, 8 November 2023; former ISWAP *qa'id*, 7 December 2023.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, former JAS fighter, 23 January 2024.

⁵⁰ On the distinction that ISIS makes between *ghanima* and *fey'u*, see Patrick B. Johnston, Mona Alami, Colin P. Clarke and Howard J. Shatz. "Return and Expand? The Finances and Prospects of the Islamic State after the Caliphate", RAND, 2019, chapter 3.

⁵¹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former JAS fighters, 3 December 2022 and 24 January 2023.

henchmen by allowing them to enter coerced marriages with these captives, a practice that ISWAP forbids.

Upon taking control of Sambisa forest in 2021, ISWAP summoned JAS religious and military leaders to explain its doctrine and policies.⁵² ISWAP insisted that attacking Muslim civilians for *fey'u* was not allowed and that JAS members would have to find other, non-predatory ways of generating income.⁵³ A few months later, ISWAP began taking away guns from the JAS groups in Sambisa. It permitted only select JAS members to join its ranks as fighters.⁵⁴

ISWAP pushed hard to enforce its rules, and many JAS members chose not to join the group, preferring to surrender to the state. Between 2021 and 2023, several thousand JAS members turned themselves in to authorities in Nigeria and Cameroon, joining the few thousand who had quit previously.⁵⁵ In Nigeria, Borno state took the newcomers in through a reintegration process; in Cameroon, most went through a weaker government-backed program.⁵⁶ Other JAS fighters chose to keep fighting both ISWAP and the government, as well as preying upon civilians. Some moved to new locations near the Sambisa forest.⁵⁷ Others joined JAS groups that ISWAP had not defeated, notably Bakura's group on the Lake Chad islands and the Bakura-aligned band in the Mandara mountains.

B. *ISWAP's Internal Tensions*

JAS's rebound under Bakura took place amid tensions within ISWAP. ISWAP's attempts to build a bureaucracy had both advantages and disadvantages for the group. The improvement of relations with civilians, the development of a tax system and access to ISIS's advice all made the movement stronger.⁵⁸ But many fighters grew suspicious of the leadership when promised benefits – such as regular salaries – did not trickle down to the rank and file. Non-payment of salaries has been the source of disputes, as has the leadership's growing effort to impose controls on weaponry.

Some ISWAP members have accordingly become critical of the group's leadership. They complain that the leaders live the good life while fighters do the hard work

⁵² Crisis Group interview, former JAS fighter, Maiduguri, 24 March 2023.

⁵³ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former JAS fighters, 15 and 19 June 2023; 1 July 2023.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former JAS fighters, 13 September 2022; 19 and 26 January 2023.

⁵⁵ According to a Nigerian security official, 150,000 persons have left Sambisa and surrendered since Shekau's death, 6,000 of whom authorities consider "hard-core fighters". Crisis Group telephone interview, 19 November 2023. It is difficult, however, for the government to distinguish JAS militants from civilians living in JAS-controlled areas. Crisis Group interviewed a few JAS fighters, notably underage ones, whom the government mistakenly released almost immediately after their surrender. Crisis Group interviews, former JAS fighters, Maiduguri, March 2023. Crisis Group correspondence, researcher, 16 October 2023.

⁵⁶ Moussa Bobbo, "La politique nationale de DDR des ex-combattants de Boko Haram à l'Extrême-Nord du Cameroun", Notes de l'IFRI, October 2023.

⁵⁷ One such group was Dar al-Gazuwa, mentioned above, which chose to operate in the vicinity of Bama, a town controlled by the military. Its aim was to reduce the likelihood of an ISWAP raid, while leaving itself the option of surrendering to the military in case ISWAP did attack. Crisis Group interview, former JAS fighter, 22 September 2023.

⁵⁸ Vincent Foucher, "The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad", Crisis Group Commentary, 29 October 2020.

without the necessary means.⁵⁹ They say the group should value their battlefield experience as much as the religious knowledge for which most leaders are chosen.⁶⁰ Other gripes include alleged favouritism, excessive punishment of misbehaving fighters, unfair pricing of *ghanima* and delays in paying for it.⁶¹

In fact, at the time it staged its attack on Shekau in 2021, ISWAP was fresh off a major dispute. For several years beforehand, Mustapha Kirmima, a respected commander who was ISWAP's top military leader (*amir ul-jaysh*), had largely controlled the organisation.⁶² In 2019, Kirmima had forced Habib Yusuf, the *wali* since 2016, to step down. In 2021, with the support of a group of ISWAP leaders and ISIS, Yusuf staged a comeback.⁶³ He directed the aggressive strategy vis-à-vis Shekau and ordered the attacks in central Nigeria. In April or May 2021, Yusuf relieved Kirmima and his lieutenants of command, having them arrested. ISWAP put Kirmima to death, officially on charges of adultery, while releasing the others.⁶⁴ The episode is still a source of tension within ISWAP, as many fighters liked Kirmima, whom they saw as more supportive of the rank and file and less keen on bureaucracy.

ISWAP's difficulties with JAS are leading more and more of its fighters to question Yusuf's governance, forming part of a trend that has seen the splinter's power and influence wane.⁶⁵ ISWAP has been through several leadership reshuffles and tightened internal controls: further limiting the availability of weapons and ammunition, punishing misbehaviour more harshly and tightening controls on fighters' access to brides.⁶⁶ Suspicions are high, feeding tensions further.⁶⁷ Each recent difficulty has prompted members to defect to JAS or to surrender to a Lake Chad basin government. In addition, since ISWAP lost a significant part of its Lake Chad domain, it has been less able to tax the farmers, fishers and herders working there. ISWAP thus has less money to keep its fighters satisfied, loyal and abiding by its rules. Lastly, the group's credibility as a security provider is eroding, particularly in northern Borno, where it is having mounting problems defending herders from JAS marauders. Many herders are moving to Chad and Cameroon.⁶⁸

⁵⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP *qaid*, 9 December 2023; former ISWAP fighters, 26 June and 11 July 2023.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² His name is sometimes said to be Krimima or Krimami.

⁶³ Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP fighter, 8 July 2023. Crisis Group interview, former ISWAP fighter, Maiduguri, 26 March 2023.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP fighters, 10 May, 8 July and 21 September 2023.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP *qaid*, 9 December 2023; former ISWAP fighters, 26 June and 11 July 2023.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP official, 8 November and 12 December 2023.

⁶⁷ Over the course of 2023, ISWAP put a number of civilians to death on suspicion of spying and chased away others. See, for instance, tweet by Zagazola, analyst, @ZagazOlaMakama, 1:52pm, 13 September 2023.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, Fulani community leader, 29 August 2023.

IV. The Implications of a JAS Resurgence

A. *Muddling Through*

Nigeria and its three Lake Chad neighbours – Cameroon, Chad and Niger – are not in an ideal posture to deal with a renewed threat from Boko Haram’s splinters. The four states are overstretched militarily and often at odds politically (with relations between Nigeria and Niger especially tense at the moment).⁶⁹ The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which functions as a coordination mechanism between the four countries around Lake Chad, is correspondingly under stress.⁷⁰ The MNJTF operation planned for 2023, Lake Sanity 2, did not take place, for reasons that were not explained publicly.⁷¹ The MNJTF finally released a communiqué after four months of silence, but the text brought little clarity: it seemed to be trying to pass off individual sorties by national forces as joint operations.⁷²

The July 2023 coup in Niger, which ratcheted up tensions with Nigeria, has been particularly damaging to MNJTF coordination, and the situation remains uncertain.⁷³ Nigeria is a prominent member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which slapped sanctions on Niamey after the putsch and threatened military intervention to reinstate the deposed president. Relations between the two capitals soured and, in August 2023, the Nigerien authorities closed the border to Nigerian troops, who could no longer resupply in Niger or pursue jihadists across the border, which the MNJTF framework had allowed.⁷⁴ The January decision by military authorities in Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali to leave ECOWAS strained regional relations further. Tensions have eased a little since, and the border between Niger and Nigeria was reopened in March 2024, but much uncertainty remains.⁷⁵

Another issue is that the other Lake Chad countries face other threats – from the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon to securing borders in Chad to non-Boko Haram jihadist violence in Niger (which, though a lesser challenge than in Mali and Burkina Faso, still commands time and attention). Nigeria is thus finding that its neighbours’ commitment to the MNJTF is weaker than in the past.

Against this backdrop, the Lake Chad governments are mostly taking a muddling-through approach, hoping that ISWAP and JAS will weaken each other further and

⁶⁹ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°188, *A Second Look at Cameroon’s Anglophone Special Status*, 31 March 2023; Crisis Group, “Averting Chaos in Chad”, video, 27 October 2022.

⁷⁰ For background on the MNJTF, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°291, *What Role for the Multinational Joint Task Force in Fighting Boko Haram?*, 7 July 2020.

⁷¹ Crisis Group correspondence, international military expert, 10 October 2023; Nigerian security official, 16 January 2024.

⁷² “La FMM enregistre de nouveaux succès dans la région du lac Tchad et de nouveaux terroristes déposent les armes – Le Commandant de la force”, MNJTF, 16 February 2024.

⁷³ See Nnamdi Obasi, “ECOWAS, Nigeria and the Niger Coup Sanctions: Time to Recalibrate”, Crisis Group Commentary, 5 December 2023; and “What Turmoil in ECOWAS Means for Nigeria and Regional Stability”, Crisis Group Commentary, forthcoming.

⁷⁴ “Letter from the Lake Chad Basin Commission Executive Secretariat to his Excellency General Mahamat Idriss Debi [sic] Itno”, 24 August 2023; Crisis Group telephone interview, Nigerian security official, 11 October 2023.

⁷⁵ Obasi, “What Turmoil in ECOWAS Means for Nigeria and Regional Stability”, op. cit. See also “West African bloc ECOWAS says it is lifting sanctions on Niger”, France 24, 24 February 2024; and “Nigeria reopens border with neighbouring Niger”, Agence France-Presse, 14 March 2024.

relying on air power to strike the jihadists in the meantime. It is not hard to see how they arrived at this strategy: since 2022, the two jihadist rivals seem to have suffered more at each other's hands than from the campaigns of Lake Chad state militaries. It is difficult to determine the number of deaths with precision, as the intra-jihadist violence is under-reported, but at the very least, several hundred fighters have died in this conflict since the end of 2022.⁷⁶

Still, the results of this strategy have been mixed. The Nigerian military claims to be doing significant damage to the groups – harassing them from the air using planes, drones and helicopters – and it probably is.⁷⁷ Several jihadist leaders have been confirmed dead in airstrikes in recent months.⁷⁸ But civilians also appear to be paying a price, with reports of residents killed in airstrikes in Borno and elsewhere.⁷⁹

Nor can the state militaries claim to have gained a decisive advantage over the insurgents in the places where they are strongest. On one hand, neither ISWAP nor JAS has launched a successful large-scale attack on a Lake Chad state military in the last three years.⁸⁰ Military casualties have fallen since 2019.⁸¹ But on the other hand, the jihadists still hold sway in the countryside. In Nigeria, the army can protect most of Borno's larger towns, but it remains unable to challenge the insurgents in rural areas.

Still, local officials are eager to move on from the conflict, and some have even begun doing so. Many officials in Nigeria, and especially in Borno state, would like to declare victory over the jihadists and focus on bringing prosperity to the region.⁸² With JAS and ISWAP still quite active, however, this shift would be premature. Authorities still lack sufficient resources to help civilians harmed by the groups or to manage the threat the latter pose.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, former ISWAP official, 8 November 2023. Crisis Group correspondence, analyst, 2 November 2023.

⁷⁷ Official claims by the Nigerian air force are widely echoed in social media. An X account to follow is @ZagazOlaMakama.

⁷⁸ Two of the dead are Ba Shuwa and Abu Jabir, who, as *walis* for central Borno and northern Borno and the lake, respectively, were right below Habib Yusuf in the ISWAP hierarchy. Abu Jabir was killed in December 2023 and Ba Shuwa in January 2024. Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP fighters and official, January 2024.

⁷⁹ See "Nigerian air force bombardments have in its wake civilian casualties: Is there an end in sight?", Humangle, 3 May 2022. The worst case occurred in December 2023, when a drone struck a wedding in Kaduna state, killing 85. Information from Borno is harder to get, but a security analyst and a journalist confirmed to Crisis Group two incidences of civilian injuries in airstrikes, one near Pulka in November 2023 and another near Kukawa on 9 January 2024. Crisis Group correspondence, January 2024. On the Kaduna case, see Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria: Erroneous Military Airstrike", 7 December 2023.

⁸⁰ ISWAP may be ready to go on the offensive again: according to an analyst, the group took over a Nigerian army base in Kirenowa in March, though it was quickly forced out when the army sent in a Tucano ground attack plane. Crisis Group correspondence, 15 March 2024. Crisis Group has been unable to verify this attack, though ISIS media did claim one such attack on a Telegram channel Crisis Group viewed.

⁸¹ See Appendix E.

⁸² "95% of people with Boko Haram's ideology dead – Borno govt", *Daily Trust*, 4 March 2024.

B. *Persistent Threat*

The revival of JAS under Bakura, together with ISWAP's resilience, shows that it is too soon for authorities to move on from the conflict. Moreover, recent developments relating to the two factions suggest more violence to come. JAS is consolidating its hold on two main enclaves: the islands of Lake Chad and the Mandara mountains. Several Crisis Group interviewees say JAS will not try to extend its control beyond these natural strongholds, whose difficult terrain its fighters are familiar with.⁸³ It lacks the motor vehicles needed to traverse the Borno savannah. Still, from the lake and mountains, JAS is in a good position both to plunder civilian settlements and to raid military targets.

Data is not available everywhere, but there have been new waves of displacement in areas where JAS groups operate. The International Organisation for Migration counted about 20,000 displaced people between February and June 2023 in the Bama, Konduga and Monguno local government areas alone. In May 2023, jihadist attacks uprooted more than 2,500 Cameroonian citizens, who fled to Nigeria's Adamawa state.⁸⁴ JAS has resumed preying on civilians in Chad's Région du Lac. It has been laying low in Niger's Diffa region, which lies to the west of the Lake Chad basin, but it previously hit that area hard and could do so again.

While JAS primarily preys on civilians, it remains a threat to the military as well. Attacks on military posts are one of the few ways for JAS to restock its arsenal. JAS's deadly raid on a Chadian garrison on the Bohoma peninsula in 2020 highlighted the group's capacity in this regard.⁸⁵ JAS could grow stronger still as a result of more defections from ISWAP, which could be a means of transferring expertise in strategy and tactics that the latter group has gleaned from ISIS.⁸⁶

A revived JAS could also reach out from its north-eastern base to cause problems in north-western Nigeria. Since Shekau's time, JAS has had fighters in the north west, led by Sadiku, a Borno-born commander.⁸⁷ This group, operating from forested hills in Kaduna state, has conducted many kidnappings for ransom, for instance grabbing passengers off the Kaduna-Abuja train in March 2022. Its status is uncertain, with reports of internal tensions, and Sadiku's relationship with Bakura is also unclear.⁸⁸ Crisis Group was unable to verify suggestions in a research report that Sadiku has developed links to groups other than JAS, including ISWAP and Ansaru.⁸⁹ A former associate of Sadiku told Crisis Group that while he criticised Bakura's killing of

⁸³ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ISWAP official, 8 November 2023; former ISWAP fighter, 20 June 2023.

⁸⁴ "IDP and Returnee Atlas", International Organization for Migration, June 2023, p. 9.

⁸⁵ "Derrière l'attaque jihadiste au Tchad", Crisis Group Commentary, 6 April 2020.

⁸⁶ Foucher, "The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad", op. cit.

⁸⁷ Little is known about Sadiku. 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 (January 2022); James Barnett and Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, "A 'Sahelian' or a 'Littoral' Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria's Boko Haram Conflict", Hudson Institute, 5 April 2023.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group correspondence, researcher, 10 October 2023. In 2023, Sadiku released audio recordings for internal circulation that allude to organisational tensions. For comments on these, see tweet by Vincent Foucher, researcher, @VincentFoucher, 10:23am, 12 September 2023; and tweet by Vincent Foucher, researcher, @VincentFoucher, 1:08am, 26 September 2023.

⁸⁹ Barnett and Rufa'i, "A 'Sahelian' or a 'Littoral' Crisis?", op. cit.

Sahalaba, he eventually pledged allegiance.⁹⁰ If Bakura were to send additional weapons and fighters to Sadiku or other JAS backers in the north west, the damage to security there could be significant.⁹¹

As for ISWAP, it is trying to consolidate its control of areas less threatened by JAS, notably in central and western Borno and in neighbouring Yobe state. In the last two months of 2023, its military activity was already on the rise. Having lost much of its arsenal to JAS, it could attack military bases to try restocking.

ISWAP's efforts to marshal its strength could have other effects in the region. It is increasing pressure on civilians in eastern Yobe state and central Borno in order to impose its rule and discourage collaboration with either JAS or the Lake Chad states. With its taxation system disrupted by the loss of most of the Lake Chad islands, the wealthiest area of rural Borno, ISWAP could change its policy, authorising more looting to generate revenue. Other possibilities include pushing its tax rates up or increasing predation on specific targets, like Christians and NGOs. There are also unconfirmed indications that ISWAP has taken to forcing young men to join its ranks, in a break with its past habits.⁹² Alternatively, ISWAP could lose control of its fighters, with small groups of them preying more freely on civilians.

As for ISWAP's campaign in the rest of Nigeria, the 2023 lull may well be just an operational pause. The authorities reported arresting several ISWAP militants in northern and central Nigeria, but the group still has networks there, having gained the support of at least some Ansaru elements. ISWAP could use these networks in an attempt to compensate for its difficulties in the Lake Chad basin. The January Nasarawa attack confirms the risk is real.

As they vie for position, the jihadist groups are hurting agriculture in northern Borno state against the backdrop of uneven rainfall and high food prices. The Famine Early Warning Systems Network, an organisation supported by the U.S. government, forecast that parts of Borno state, notably those at some distance from the lakeshore, will remain in the emergency phase (the last before the famine phase) in the short term.⁹³ Food insecurity could affect the conflict in various ways. It could weaken the jihadist factions by undercutting their economic bases and drawing civilians away from them. Equally, it could increase the groups' attractiveness to civilians because they control the fields, pastures and fishing ponds where people earn their livelihoods.

C. The Need for Continued Assistance

If violence, displacement and food insecurity persist or increase, humanitarian assistance will be needed to lessen the toll on civilians. But the Borno state and Nigerian federal governments have been suggesting that the conflict is winding down, with

⁹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, former Sadiku associate, 14 July 2023.

⁹¹ For background, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°288, *Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem*, 18 May 2020.

⁹² ISWAP kidnapped 35 young men in Abadam local government area in December 2023. In one such incident, the group grabbed two athletic-looking young men from among the passengers in a commercial vehicle at a roadblock. Crisis Group correspondence, analyst, 16 January 2024.

⁹³ "Emergency (IPC Phase 4) expected in parts of north east through 2023 harvest", FewsNet, June 2023; and "High food assistance needs in north amid macroeconomic crisis and below-average harvest", FewsNet, September 2023.

victory on the horizon. They are pushing for stabilisation, reconstruction and development aid instead of emergency assistance, phasing out the latter.⁹⁴ The Borno authorities are preparing to close down the informal camps for internally displaced people in Maiduguri, the state capital, and are studying the feasibility of removing formal camps in other towns as well.⁹⁵ The UN special adviser on solutions to internal displacement visited north-eastern Nigeria in May 2023 in support of this “stabilisation” agenda.⁹⁶

To address persistent needs, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs’ 2023 humanitarian response plan – prepared in collaboration with the government, other UN agencies and NGOs – defined a slightly larger budget than in 2022.⁹⁷ But that 2023 budget was still only about 40 per cent funded as of January 2024.⁹⁸ The funding actually available diminishes every year, reflecting the fact that the Lake Chad humanitarian crisis is an ever lower priority for Nigeria and donors alike. Other, more recent crises have taken centre stage. Relations between humanitarian NGOs and the Borno authorities are marked by suspicion and frustration, with frequent episodes of tension, which complicates resource mobilisation further.⁹⁹

D. *Defection Support and Challenges*

Another important challenge involves dealing with the thousands of JAS fighters, their relatives and non-combatant JAS associates who left JAS-controlled areas after Shekau’s death in 2021, particularly in Nigeria. Thanks to the creation of defection programs by the four Lake Chad states starting in the late 2010s, thousands of fighters have turned themselves in, which has gone some way toward weakening the insurgencies.¹⁰⁰

Nigeria has the strongest defection programs in the Lake Chad basin. The Nigerian military runs the oldest one, Operation Safe Corridor. While it offers a package of assistance including psycho-social support, training and education, it suffers from

⁹⁴ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°184, *Rethinking Resettlement and Return in Nigeria’s North East*, 16 January 2023.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian expert, Paris, 6 December 2023. See also “Borno state government to close all informal IDP camps”, *West African Pilot News*, 26 February 2024.

⁹⁶ “Foreign affairs minister Onyeama meets UN assistant secretary-general on internal displacement solutions”, *Diplomatic Watch*, 12 May 2023.

⁹⁷ “Key Messages on Solutions to Internal Displacement across the States of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe”, Protection Sector Northeast Nigeria, 23 May 2023.

⁹⁸ “Nigeria Country Snapshot for 2023”, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

⁹⁹ The latest episode saw the closure of an NGO support organisation accused of not having properly registered with the Borno authorities. “Borno gov’t seals IMMAP France office over illegal operation”, *Northeast Punchline*, 1 January 2024.

¹⁰⁰ For an overview of existing programs, see Fonteh Akum, Remadji Hoinathy and Malik Samuel, “Managing the Journey out of Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin”, Institute of Security Studies, March 2021. On the two main Nigerian programs, see Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°170, *An Exit from Boko Haram? Assessing Nigeria’s Operation Safe Corridor*, 19 March 2021; and “Inside Nigeria’s centres for jihadists and their captives”, AFP, 11 April 2023. On the Cameroonian program, see Bobbo, “La politique nationale de DDR”, *op. cit.* On the Niger program, see Florian Morier, “Program Insight: The Screening Process of Disengaged Boko Haram Associates in Niger”, *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 21 (2019).

limited intake and cumbersome procedures.¹⁰¹ Soon after Shekau's death, Borno state rushed to develop a program to handle the emergency created by the resulting exit of the tens of thousands of people – a mix of fighters, captives, civilians, wives and children – from JAS areas. This “Borno model” program relies on very rough triage. It has released the bulk of people into towns and displacement camps. Several thousand fighters and their relatives have been sent to a few designated camps in Maiduguri, where they receive a cash allowance and food support. Unlike Safe Corridor, it offers minimal training and education for now.

Many former fighters interviewed by Crisis Group said they appreciated being allowed to leave the jihad unharmed and getting assistance, including cash. Those who chose to join a pro-government auxiliary force, who get an additional allowance, seem rather content, having found in the state a better employer than the jihadist organisations.¹⁰² But most JAS defectors left because the group was weaker following Shekau's death. With JAS regaining strength, some of them may be tempted to go back. Some defectors say the economic situation in government-controlled areas compares unfavourably to the livelihoods they enjoyed previously.¹⁰³

The Borno state authorities have been trying to consolidate the rehabilitation program and reached an agreement with international partners to support it.¹⁰⁴ It is not clear what this deal entails or whether it can keep defectors on the government's side, much less whether it can do so without further antagonising civilians who resent that defectors are receiving aid.¹⁰⁵

The other three Lake Chad states are not as concerned about defection programming, and their efforts have lost strength over time. One reason is that their perception of the threat from JAS and ISWAP has diminished, but there are others, too. In Chad, most fighters got a de facto amnesty, followed by reintegration under the oversight of village chiefs. The new military regime in Niger closed down the Goudoumaria centre, which hosted defectors, in August 2023 and now simply sends the few new defectors to relatives.¹⁰⁶ In Cameroon, reintegration has stalled, with defectors largely fending for themselves in ad hoc centres or elsewhere.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group Briefing, *An Exit from Boko Haram?*, op. cit.

¹⁰² Sometime between 2022 and 2023, Borno state also began using several hundred of these defectors as auxiliaries (eg, as scouts for the military) of their combat operations against the jihadist groups. There are suspicions about the loyalty of some of the defectors, however, as well as reports that others operate with impunity, feeling confident enough to abuse civilians or newly arrived defectors. Crisis Group telephone interviews, 23 September 2023.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, March 2023.

¹⁰⁴ “Gov Zulum signs a joint memorandum for UN support for managing the mass defection of terrorists in Borno state”, *Arewa Reporters*, 13 October 2023.

¹⁰⁵ People in Borno state – and throughout Nigeria – were very hostile to the idea of defections at first. The fear of defectors has largely subsided, at least in Borno, but many remain frustrated about what appears to be an amnesty with material benefits attached for serious crimes. Crisis Group interviews, Nigerian journalists and civil society activists, Maiduguri, March 2023.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group correspondence, Nigerien researcher, 9 November 2023.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, Cameroonian NGO worker, 11 September 2023. See also Bobbo, “La politique nationale de DDR”, op. cit.

V. How to Respond to the Crisis

The conflict in the Lake Chad basin is by no means over. It has several possible trajectories: the status quo could continue; the two insurgencies could strike a bargain to limit attacks on each other; or the fighting could weaken both groups and allow the governments to win a decisive victory. One way or another, premature efforts to move past the conflict could redound to the strategic detriment of the Lake Chad states and the humanitarian detriment of too many people who live there.

A. Consolidate Humanitarian Assistance

The immediate focus should be on meeting the daily needs of the populations affected by the violence. The Lake Chad countries, and notably the Nigerian and Borno state governments, the UN, donor countries and international NGOs, should work together to strengthen the provision of humanitarian assistance and raise funds for the UN response plan. Food security, which is very fragile in a number of Borno local government areas, should remain a priority.

Even as it maintains its stabilisation and development effort, the Borno state government should make clear that it is too early to phase out humanitarian assistance. It should convene the relevant UN agencies as well as leading international and Nigerian NGOs to discuss persistent needs, encouraging the various coordination structures, notably the High Level Task Force on Resettlement and the Humanitarian Country Team, to bring all these actors to the table.

As Crisis Group has said before, Borno state needs to proceed with caution in closing camps for internally displaced people (IDPs).¹⁰⁸ The authorities should make sure that IDPs and refugees are not returned to villages or resettled to secondary towns unless they are safe enough to live and work in. Otherwise, resettled civilians will again fall victim to jihadists or may feel they have no choice but to cut deals with the insurgents to reach the fields, pastures and fishing spots from which they subsist.

B. Improve Civilian Protection

Civilians in rural areas are suffering the worst of the violence. Efforts to improve security provision through the use of auxiliaries, whether militias like the Civilian Joint Task Force or defectors, are insufficiently regulated and less than reliable. Solid security provision demands regular military and police units. In order to be successful, the reinforcement of security forces must be complemented with strengthened mechanisms for reporting abuse and displacement, whether through state institutions, NGOs or the media.

The Nigerian military's use of air power, while helpful in curbing large-scale attacks on state-protected localities, continues to put civilians at risk. It needs more training, including in using special forces to help in targeting and assessing damage. In addition to possibly seeking assistance from international partners on these functions, the military should focus on improving procedures used to authorise airstrikes in order to create greater uniformity and higher standards in targeting.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group Briefing, *Rethinking Resettlement and Return in Nigeria's North East*, op. cit.

C. *Assist and Monitor Defectors*

Each of the four Lake Chad basin countries needs to find its own way to help and monitor defectors and to discourage them from taking up arms again. Resource-intensive encampments of the Safe Corridor type are not easily replicable and have proven difficult to sustain, even in Nigeria where they have gained the most traction.¹⁰⁹ Efforts by the Borno state government to consolidate its alternative ad hoc defection program with the assistance of UN agencies are welcome, and donors should lend their support as well. While no one knows how the war between the jihadist factions will play out, in some scenarios it could encourage more fighters to surrender, so credible defection programs, for all their limitations, are essential to show jihadists that they do indeed have a way out.

On the other hand, the authorities and their international partners need to take into account the suspicions and frustrations of ordinary citizens in the Lake Chad countries. Many see the defection programs as rewarding insurgents and granting them impunity. As Crisis Group has previously recommended, a way to address these concerns would be to try high-level captured (as opposed to defecting) jihadists in a fair, well-prepared and well-publicised manner.¹¹⁰

D. *Reinvigorate Regional Security Cooperation*

The jihadist insurgencies in the Lake Chad basin had good reason to choose border areas, including the islands and the Mandara mountains, as places to entrench themselves. Being able to slip across borders and take shelter in difficult terrain gives them an edge. Regional cooperation is essential to taking it away. Even as they deal with other pressing security problems, the Lake Chad neighbours will need to keep sufficient focus on ISWAP and JAS, partly by reinvigorating the MNJTF. Among other things, Nigeria will need to find ways to work with Niger, notwithstanding its 2023 coup. Crisis Group has offered recommendations elsewhere for steps Nigeria and its ECOWAS partners can take to try to heal the rift with Niger and the two other Sahelian states that have left the bloc.¹¹¹

Nigeria, which is both the richest of the Lake Chad countries and the most affected by the conflict, should take the lead. It was Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari's involvement that activated the MNJTF, and it now falls to his successor, President Bola Tinubu, to jump-start it once more. He can make the point that as regional cooperation (eg, the G5 Sahel force) lapses, jihadists will have more gaps to exploit; the Lake Chad countries should not give them that opportunity.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group Briefing, *An Exit from Boko Haram?*, op. cit.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

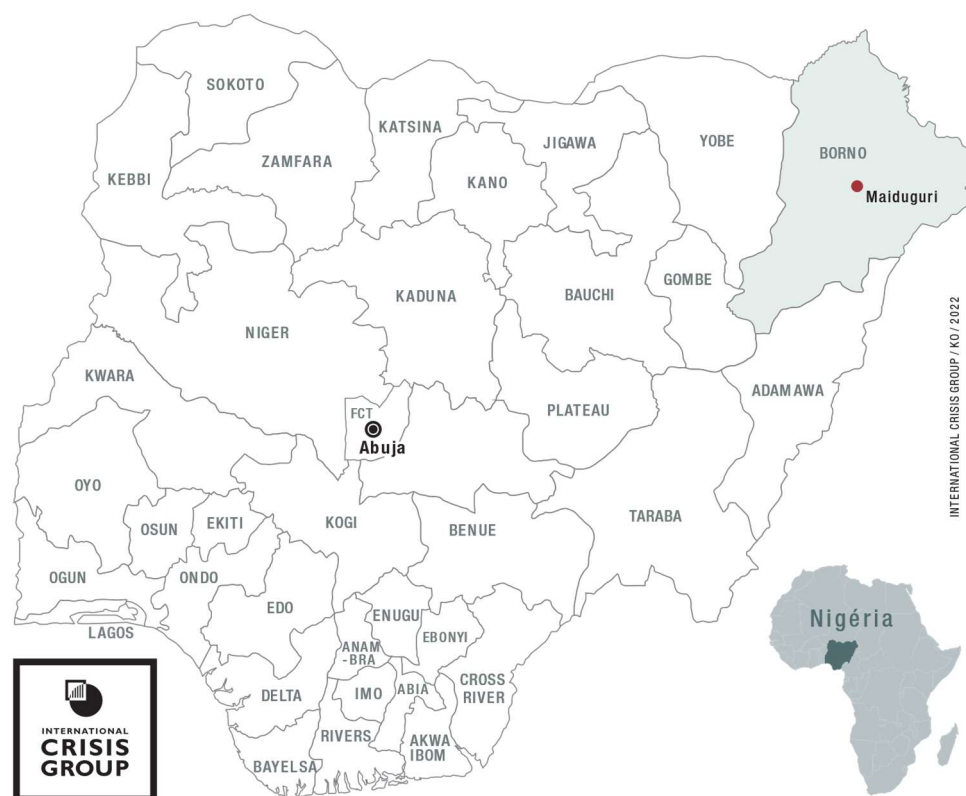
¹¹¹ Obasi, "What Turmoil in ECOWAS Means for Nigeria and Regional Stability", op. cit.

VI. Conclusion

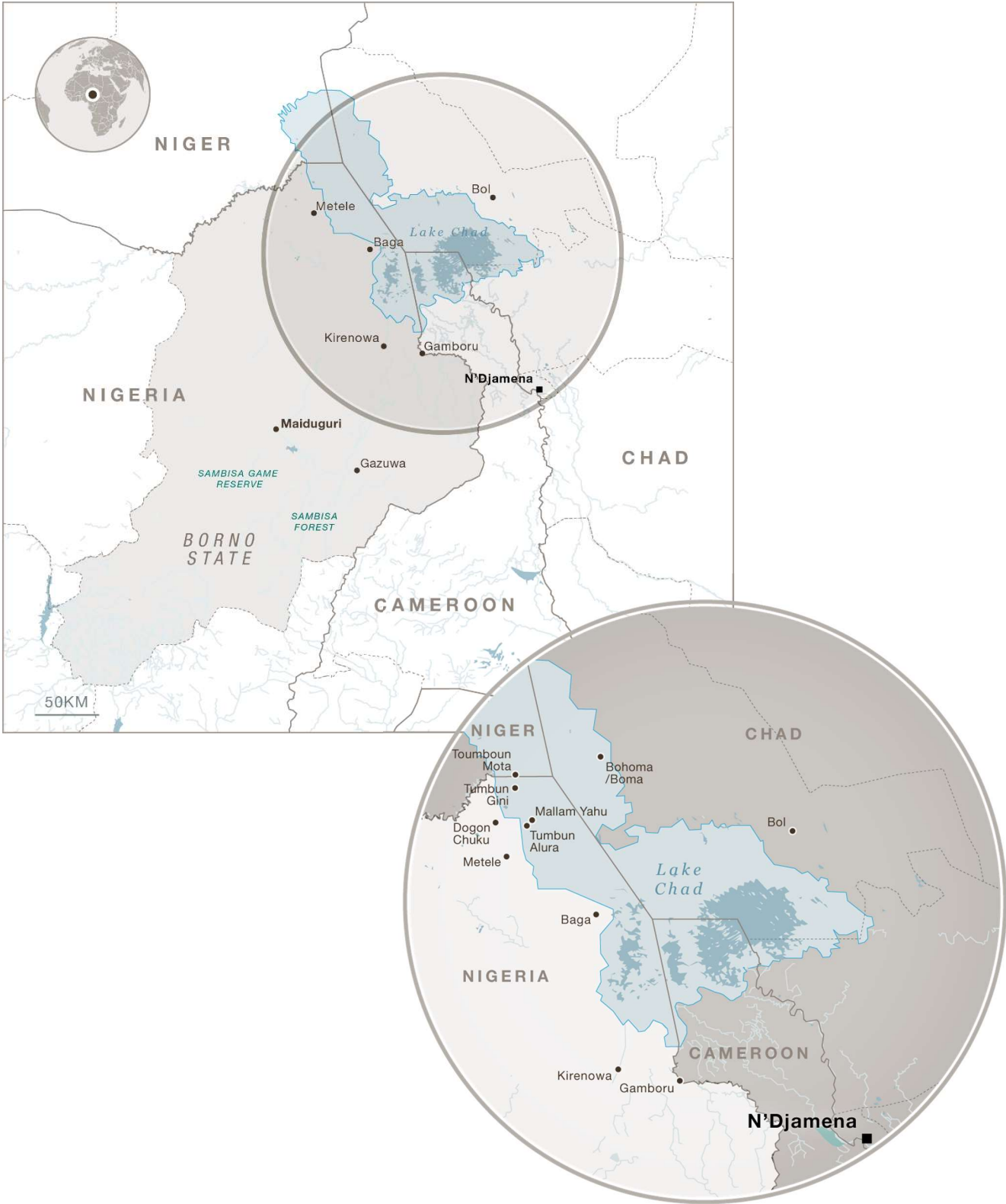
The fight between the jihadist factions in the Lake Chad basin has intensified from the end of 2022, leading both to scale back their attacks on regional militaries. The conflict in the Lake Chad basin has slid down the Nigerian and international agendas, with the authorities of Borno state in particular insisting that the time to rebuild has come. But the drop in military casualties does not mean that JAS and ISWAP are no longer threats and that the Lake Chad states can afford to move on to other issues. The revived JAS may seem less dangerous than ISWAP for the time being, but it can nonetheless do a lot of damage, particularly if it keeps gathering strength. Contrary to what regional powers wish, conflict is not yet over. Nigeria and the other Lake Chad states will have to devote considerable attention to meeting the threat posed by Boko Haram's splinters if they wish to usher the region and their people into a new period of greater peace and security.

Dakar/Brussels, 28 March 2024

Appendix A: Map of Nigeria

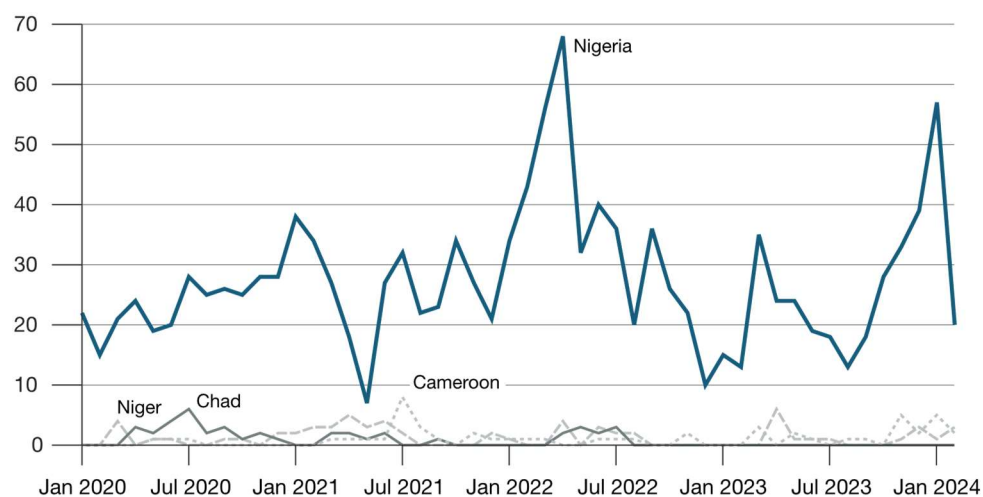


Appendix B: Map of North East Nigeria



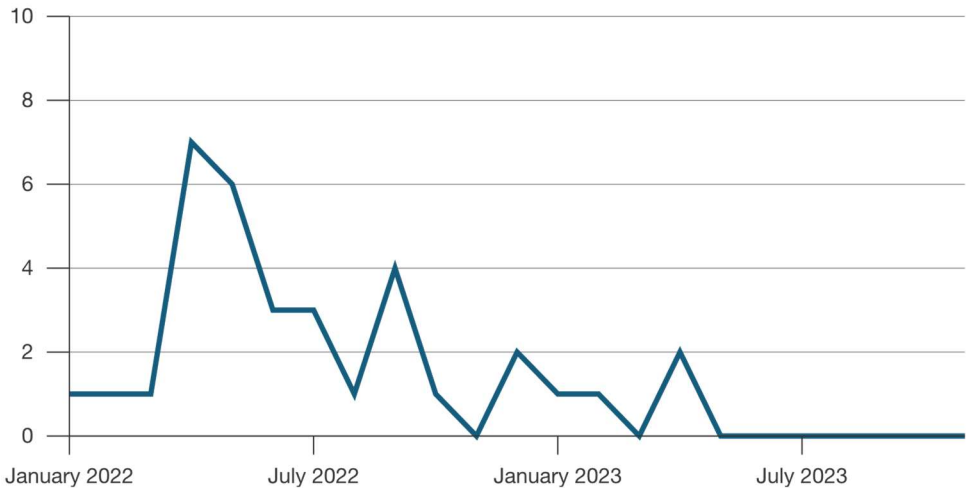
Source: Mapcreator, OSM, March 2024. CRISIS GROUP / Claire Boccon-Gibod

Appendix C: ISWAP's Attack Claims 2020-2024



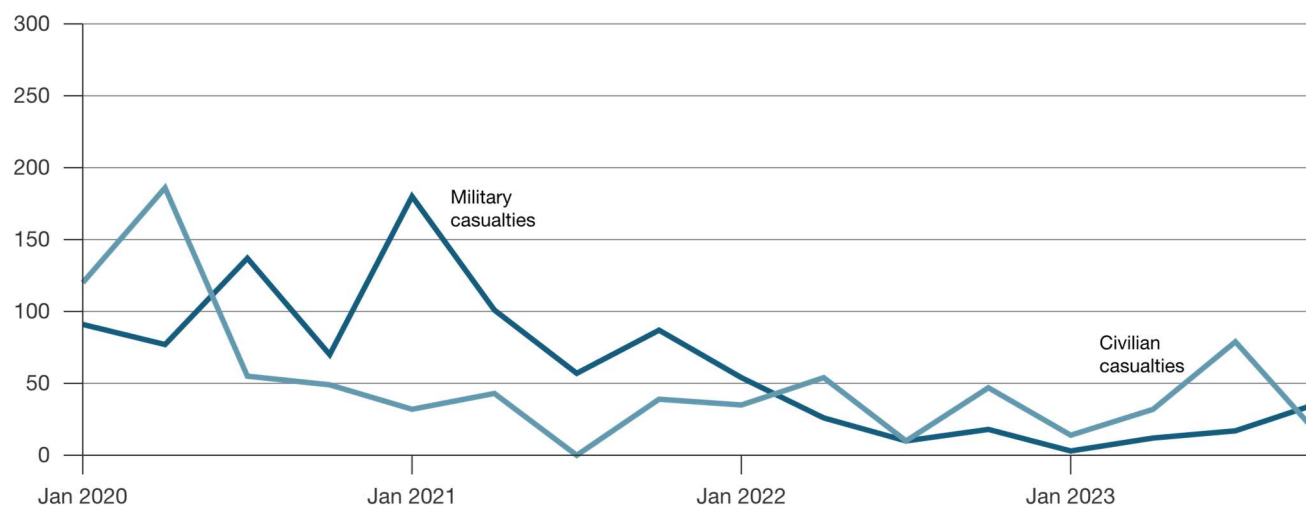
Source: Tomasz Rolbiecki, as of February 2024. CRISIS GROUP

Appendix D: ISWAP's Campaign Outside North East Nigeria 2022-2024



Source: Tomasz Rolbiecki, as of February 2024. CRISIS GROUP

Appendix E: Military and Civilians Casualties in Borno State 2020-2023



Source: Tomasz Rolbiecki, as of February 2024. CRISIS GROUP

Appendix F: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2021

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