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Brief: Is Boko Haram Bracing for Another 'Quiet' Year in 2024?; Terrorism Monitor Volume: 22 Issue: 1

By: [Jacob Zenn](#)

Executive Summary

- Boko Haram and its ISWAP faction have been locked in a stalemate with the Nigerian military. The group may only seek to preserve the status quo rather than risk provoking a major army offensive.
- The stalemate has persisted since 2014. ISWAP briefly expanded attacks into southern Nigeria starting in April 2022, but this expansion seems to have halted by April 2023.

Since Boko Haram's kidnapping of more than 250 mostly Christian schoolgirls in April 2014, the group has become a household name. For several years during the last decade, Boko Haram was also the world's "deadliest" terrorist group ([Vanguard](#) [Nigeria], May 29, 2014). In Boko Haram's heartland in northeastern Nigeria, the group has, however, reached a stalemate with the Nigerian army. The terrorist group has been unable to penetrate the Nigerian military's fortified "supercamps" surrounding main towns. The army, on the other hand, has been unable or unwilling to conduct raids deep into Boko Haram territory for fear of mines, ambushes, or other surprise attacks.

The year 2023 saw the stalemate in northeastern Nigeria continue. However, Boko Haram—and specifically the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) faction—continued its expansion into southern Nigeria, at least until April 2023 ([Sahara Reporters](#), June 5, 2022). The expansion began one year earlier in April 2022, but seems to have ebbed since ([Premium Times](#) [Nigeria], August 11, 2022). ISWAP's expansion south had the potential to radically alter the dynamics of jihadist insurgency in Nigeria. However, the halting of ISWAP's expansion has meant that it remains bound principally to

northeastern Nigeria. It shares this territory with its rival faction, Jamatu Ahli Al-Sunna lil Da'wa Wal Jihad (JASDJ).

The question remains as to whether there will be any major changes to the conflict's dynamics in 2024. One catalyst for a potential ISWAP strategic shift could be influence from Islamic State (IS) core in the Middle East. However, there is little evidence that ISWAP consults IS, or that IS advises ISWAP. This had previously occurred in the years after ISWAP's formation as an IS province in 2015, and there was evidence of cooperation even until 2021, when ISWAP launched an offensive to kill the JASDJ leader, Abubakar Shekau, with IS guidance ([Australian National Security](#), July 3, 2023). While IS still communicates with ISWAP—with the former claiming the latter's attacks, for example—IS's embattled core leadership may not be in a position to direct major ISWAP shifts or innovations any further.

Another possible catalyst for change is the Sahel's growing political instability. This has provided opportunities for al-Qaeda's Sahelian affiliate, Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), and its rival Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) opportunities to consolidate their foothold in the region and launch attacks on regional armies. The groups have also attacked the national armies' Russian Wagner Group allies, as well as withdrawing UN and French forces ([France24](#), April 22, 2023). While ISWAP's ties to ISGS may have once existed at the top stratum of its leadership and in propaganda, the coordination of strategies and exchanges of weapons and foot soldiers have been minimal. Moreover, the two group's areas of operations have not overlapped—even in Niger, where they both operate—and ISWAP's hostility to JNIM's Nigeria-based ally, Ansaru, suggests that JNIM would reject and fight back against any ISWAP infiltration into the Sahel.

At the same time, ISWAP has generally achieved the original objectives laid out by Muhammed Yusuf, the group's founder, before his (extrajudicial) killing by the Nigerian security forces in 2009 ([Al Jazeera](#), July 31, 2009). The group has succeeded in establishing an "Islamic state" in at least part of the territory of northeastern Nigeria where Muslims can live under sharia law. Moreover, the group has excised the "tumor" that JASDJ's brutal now-late leader, Abubakar Shekau, had brought to jihadism in Nigeria through his "deviance and excesses" ([Unmasking Boko Haram](#), June 2018). While ISWAP may never conquer all of Nigeria, the group has exceeded expectations from the time of Yusuf's death. It may be the case that they will seek to simply preserve the status quo rather than risk provoking the Nigerian army, which could rededicate itself to eliminating ISWAP's "caliphate," with or without the support of international or regional forces.

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