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Commentary

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The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad

While in decline in the Levant, the Islamic State has claimed some gains in Africa. Testimonies from defectors who once waged jihad in the Lake Chad basin shed new light on the impact and workings of the “caliphate” south of the Sahara.

After the dramatic collapse of the Islamic State (ISIS) “caliphate” in 2017, officials and observers are debating whether renewed attacks by ISIS in Iraq signal a resurgence there. What seems undeniable, though, is that the fortunes of ISIS-linked militants in sub-Saharan Africa are rising. The ISIS franchise in the Sahel has expanded significantly, confounding the efforts of regional armies and a French-led military mission. In Mozambique, on the continent’s other side, ISIS-linked militants have opened a new front in the country’s gas-rich north. The most potent splinter group of the movement formerly known as Boko Haram, which has redoubled attacks on security forces in north-eastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad basin, also brands itself as an ISIS affiliate: the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP).

Information about ISIS’s growth in Africa is scarce. Crisis Group can now shed new light on the subject, however, based on extensive interviews with former fighters about how ISIS cultivates and supports allies on the continent. In November 2019 and March 2020, Crisis Group interviewed sixteen defectors from Boko Haram and ISWAP. Among the persons interviewed were several former fighters who had served as bodyguards for different senior commanders,

as well as one of the men involved in running the electronic communication platforms used by Nigerian jihadists to consult with the ISIS caliphate in the Levant. The account below is pieced together primarily from their testimony, with information almost always corroborated by at least two of those sources, consulted independently.

The findings relate only to the period prior to these men’s defection (2017 or early 2018 at the latest) and are specific to the experience of Boko Haram and ISWAP. But they provide a sense of how ISIS deployed limited yet targeted support such as ideological and operational guidance, as well as small amounts of money, to upgrade the capabilities of a distant jihadist group adopting the ISIS brand and make it a far more potent insurgent force. They also show how the group supports its franchises without exerting direct control, even if the relationship is at times fraught, and how local groups, and factions within them, benefit from ISIS ties. The research complements earlier work by Crisis Group on how ISIS can take advantage of local [disorder](#) and grievances, often piggybacking on local conflicts.

How Boko Haram Became an Islamic State Franchise

ISWAP's rapid rise – defying [joint military operations](#) by the Lake Chad countries Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon that spanned their border regions – is still poorly understood, as is the extent of its ties with ISIS. What is clear from Crisis Group's interviewees is that the global jihadist group played a critical role in rebranding the Lake Chad militants under its franchise and provided them with valuable concrete assistance that strengthened their insurgency. Yet the nature of ISIS's involvement was often dictated by events and local militants' decisions in Africa, rather than by policies formulated in the Levant.

The Nigerian militants were keen to associate themselves with ISIS from the time it gained prominence. In June 2014, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared a caliphate in the Levant, jihadist camps in Nigeria were abuzz with the news. In August, Abubakar Shekau, then both the leader and "imam" of [Boko Haram](#) (known formally as Jama'at Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, or JAS), issued [his own statement](#), announcing that the territory JAS had acquired was "a state among the states of Islam". Contrary to what has occasionally been reported, Shekau did not proclaim a caliphate of his own. But neither did he swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi's caliphate; in fact, he did not mention it. Defectors say Shekau's objective was simply to identify himself with ISIS in order to appease those JAS fighters and affiliates who wanted a close relationship with ISIS, without referring explicitly to al-Baghdadi as his superior.

The JAS militants who saw the benefit in ISIS ties were those who had the greatest international experience and believed that forming relations abroad could help them scale up their activities. Some of them had spent time in Algeria or Sudan during the 1990s before joining Boko Haram. Some also had previous contacts with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and others had taken part in jihad in Somalia. Defectors said the top JAS military commander

(*amir al-jaysh*) at the time, Aliyu al-Gombewi – himself experienced in fighting abroad – was the most vocal advocate of linking up with ISIS.

It is not clear how contacts between JAS and ISIS were first established, but defectors describe sustained internet-based communication from 2015 onward. At first, the primary communications challenge was that Boko Haram lacked a stable internet connection – as is already known from the [testimony](#) of a Tunisian militant from the Ansar al-Sharia organisation who had reached out to JAS. Defectors say the militants soon overcame such technical difficulties, however, and contacts eventually went smoothly. At that point, ISIS began giving JAS advice on how to manage its communications, suggesting that it use the messaging application Telegram – popular among jihadists due to heavy encryption – instead of WhatsApp.

The two organisations exchanged audios, videos, photos and documents about recent battles, internal organisation and religious doctrine, sometimes on a daily basis. The back-and-forth included occasional live-streaming conversations between leaders on both sides. On ISIS's side, Abu Mohammad Al-Adnani, chief of the group's external operations, who was killed in August 2016 in Syria in a U.S. strike, was reportedly the key interlocutor. On the JAS side, participants were Shekau himself as well as members of the *shura*, then chaired by Mamman Nur, a popular preacher and a companion of Boko Haram's late founder, Mohamed Yusuf.

As the groups communicated and leaders on both sides could evaluate the logic and potential benefits of a partnership, defectors say tensions were apparent between Shekau and some of his detractors over relations with ISIS. The JAS leader was an advocate of brutal tactics, including suicide bombings targeting civilians and attacks on mosques, as well as the use of women and even young girls to deliver or detonate bombs. He considered Muslim civilians

who were not loyal to JAS to be legitimate targets. Shekau's opponents within JAS hoped that ISIS would help them rein in his most extreme methods.

As the conversations continued, Shekau remained reluctant to swear allegiance to the caliphate, lest he wind up diluting his own power. As a defector told Crisis Group: "Shekau feared two or three things: that he would lose control; that he would be receiving orders; and that he could be demoted from imam to *wali* (a sort of governor)". According to defectors, Shekau explained to *shura* members who pushed him to declare fealty that he wanted to meet al-Baghdadi in person before making his pledge – which his fellow jihadists interpreted as a delaying tactic, given how difficult it would have been to organise such a meeting. At some point, he even brought up the question of Boko Haram's prior ties to al-Qaeda, even though those connections had withered away several years before.

It took a string of JAS military defeats to force Shekau to think again. By early 2015, JAS had lost several towns it had captured earlier, and it was falling back on safer areas, notably Sambisa, a large forest in the middle of Borno state in Nigeria's north east. On 7 March of that year, Shekau finally swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi, a move that defectors portray as a cry for help. Later that month, Shekau would lose JAS's self-proclaimed capital, Gwoza, to Nigerian army units backed by a South African [private military company](#). As the militants fell back, the army destroyed dozens of their "technicals", the four-wheel-drive vehicles that can carry heavy machine guns and are used in warfare across the continent. More than ever, Shekau needed any assistance ISIS could provide, not only to beat back the Nigerian military and their allies but also to stem the renewed tide of internal criticism panning his performance as a leader. In the end, he saw swearing allegiance as a necessary risk.

Ideology, Training and Reform

Following Shekau's pledge, defectors interviewed by Crisis Group say, ISIS began sending support to Nigeria in the form of ideological and operational guidance, but also some material assistance.

The Nigerian militants were first and foremost eager to ask ISIS for guidance on subjects of theology and policy. Shekau submitted a book by Mohamed Yusuf, Boko Haram's founder, [*Hadhihi 'Aqidatuna wa Minhaj Da'watina*](#) (This is our Creed and Method of Proclamation), which ISIS approved as in line with its doctrine. One defector described the relationship: "If there is an issue, Shekau assembles the commanders or the *shura* to prepare a question to submit to ISIS. Then ISIS replies, giving a Quranic verse or a *hadith* [a record of the sayings or actions of the Prophet Muhammad which serves as guidance for Muslims]: 'The Prophet said this or that'. In Boko Haram, we do not have advanced knowledge. We do not have strong clerics". In their search

for validation of beliefs and practices, Nigerian militants clearly acknowledged al-Baghdadi's pre-eminence.

There were limits, however, to when Shekau would listen to ISIS's advice. When dissenters from Shekau's line called on ISIS to arbitrate disputes, their Levantine interlocutors would often side with them: notably, ISIS averred that it was wrong for ISWAP to enslave Muslim women and girls captured in areas controlled by the governments it was fighting. In this case, Shekau responded that he was enslaving only Christians or Muslim apostates, and carried on with his original practice. ISIS also disapproved of using women as suicide bombers, insisting that this tactic be a last resort. In one defector's words, "Islamic State told [Shekau] that an *amaliya* [a suicide attack by a girl or a young woman] can happen only when you are surrounded and have no exit. Then, maybe, a girl can decide to sacrifice her life. But you cannot put a jacket [rigged with explosives] on a girl

and send her to attack civilians”. On this issue, too, Shekau refused to yield and continued sending women and girls with bombs.

Such disagreements did not, however, dissuade ISIS from providing more support to the Lake Chad militants. ISWAP in fact received plenty of military guidance. One defector said ISWAP sent ISIS pictures of a piece of equipment it had seized from the Cameroonian military during an attack in October 2014. It asked its interlocutors in the Levant what the machine was. The reply informed them they had captured an unarmed drone, appending video instructions for assembling and using it. Thereafter, ISWAP began using its first drone for surveillance and reconnaissance. In another case, ISWAP reached out for advice on producing AK-47 ammunition, which was in short supply. ISIS replied in the form of a video detailing how to proceed using gunpowder from artillery shells. Several defectors also confirmed that the Levantines advised ISWAP to armour-plate its vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices.

Beyond the remote advice, ISIS sent trainers in person to Nigeria. Soon after Shekau’s oath, a team of six to eight “Arabs” led by Abu Obeidah, reportedly an experienced Libyan jihadist, arrived in the Sambisa forest. The trainers spent several months there. The commanders of all ISWAP’s units, even those based outside Sambisa, were called in for courses on strategy and tactics. Notably, the visitors suggested that ISWAP revise what had become its standard assault tactics – infantry charges – in favour of manoeuvres by smaller, better trained units. One defector said: “They taught us about anti-aircraft techniques, armour, infantry. We benefited so much from them. They went to fight with us. They observed us, explaining that our way was so dangerous that it was like suicide”.

The caliphate also tried to push through a gamut of reforms to improve ISWAP’s effectiveness in the field. It sent a detailed schedule for a daily routine for male members, which included physical and religious education. One defector described the routine: “Early in the morning, you have to jog and do press-ups. Every fighter does that. Then you read the Book (the Quran). Then you wash and dress. And we have morning patrols, too”. More fundamentally, ISIS forbade the use of child soldiers and pushed ISWAP to found a standing army housed in barracks instead of sticking with militias that mobilised men to fight as needed. It also suggested creating an *amniya*, an internal security service to monitor fighters, along the lines of what it had done in the Levant.

In addition, the Arab visitors trained the ISWAP media team (though even after the session, they felt that its output was weak and insisted that raw footage be sent to the ISIS core for editing). They also urged Shekau – a mercurial figure whose media appearances have often been incoherent – to keep a low profile, justifying themselves with reference to ISIS’s own security policy for *walis*.

After the trainers left, the Lake Chad militants rolled out reforms, albeit unevenly. ISWAP created the embryo of an *amniya*, under a longstanding member, Mallam Tahiru Baga, but no standing army. It took some grudging steps on the issue of child soldiers. As one former fighter notes: “Some kids were sent back to school. But some had zeal and refused to go. There is advantage with children. They don’t have any fear. Even more, they would shout at others to head on [in battle]”. As for the training routine, it had limited impact, according to another defector: “Even Shekau was not following instructions. People are lazy”.

Material and Financial Assistance

Defectors interviewed by Crisis Group insist that ISIS did not send weapons, which chimes with [other](#) research finding that ISWAP gets – and, previously, Boko Haram got – most of its

arms by capturing them from regional armies. Instead, defectors say that ISIS organised money transfers. Assistance came at least every two weeks in amounts varying from \$10,000 to

\$100,000 via occasional transfers to associated individuals or companies in Nigeria or deliveries by Nigerian couriers who would visit Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates to collect the cash on ISWAP's behalf.

These couriers would also buy goods – notably electronics – in the Gulf trading hubs, with the intent of reselling them in Nigeria and passing on the profits to ISWAP or to equip its fighters. On one occasion, defectors say, the windfall supported the purchase of several second-hand four-wheel-drive vehicles, which came all the way to ISWAP's territory from harbours on the West African coast. On another occasion, couriers bought warm caps and handed them out to soldiers for the cold season.

ISIS money also played a key part in the handling of ISWAP's [ghanima](#), or booty obtained in war. According to the caliphate's interpretation of Islamic legal principles, fighters who seize money or property are supposed to share four fifths of the loot among themselves

and give one fifth to the organisation. The ISWAP leadership, however, retains the right to buy any military or transport equipment that fighters have taken. ISWAP's leaders used ISIS donations to obtain hardware from fighters at agreed-upon prices – ISIS headquarters reportedly even issued a price list. In facilitating these purchases, ISIS helped provide the fighters with an income (defectors mentioned that fighters could earn up to 150,000 nairas, or \$350, from a successful raid) while also helping the ISWAP command centralise key weaponry.

Even as ISIS sent money to ISWAP, it made clear that it might have to cut off this support at some point as a result of international efforts to curb terrorist financing. ISIS thus encouraged ISWAP to become financially self-sustaining, sharing lessons from [its experience governing portions of Iraq and Syria](#), where it tried to maintain a functioning and taxable economy in areas under its control.

Shekau's Troubled Relationships and ISWAP's Split

Despite benefiting from ISIS's largesse, Shekau bristled at the caliph's assertions of authority over him. When ISIS requested 1,000 ISWAP fighters to help defend the city of Sirte in Libya, Shekau declined, saying he could not spare the men. According to defector accounts, Shekau was often irritated at the constant prying of Abu Obeidah and his team, whom he believed posed a threat to his command. He was particularly wary of ISIS demands for details of the manpower, military hardware and finances at ISWAP's disposal. He eventually tried to arrest Abu Obeidah's team, but ISWAP's top military commander Aliyu al-Gombewi rushed them out of Sambisa to Lake Chad, whence they escaped. Soon afterward, however, Shekau sent an armed band after Aliyu and had him killed.

Shekau's most troubled relationship was not, however, with ISIS but with his detractors inside ISWAP. After he declined ISIS's request to send fighters in Libya, ISWAP's Lake Chad

area commander, Abubakar Mainok, sent some fighters himself, highlighting the growing rift between Shekau and those who wanted a closer working relationship with ISIS (a defector interviewed by Crisis Group recognised two former Lake Chad fighters among the few sub-Saharan Africans portrayed in a promotional [Islamic State in Libya video](#) from May 2016). Meanwhile, Shekau antagonised many other commanders with what they saw as his hoarding of cash and weapons and his refusal to share this bounty with those he did not like or trust.

Around mid-2016, about a year after Shekau's oath to al-Baghdadi, ISWAP split in two, with internal opposition to Shekau's leadership finally coming to a head. A number of senior Nigerian jihadists began to voice their discontent with him in private conversations with ISIS, defectors told Crisis Group. Although ISIS never sanctioned a move against Shekau, his lieutenants felt emboldened to act because they

believed that their interlocutors in the Levant were also growing frustrated. Unbeknownst to ISIS, a number of senior ISWAP commanders and Shekau aides, including the head of the *shura*, Mamman Nur, and Habib Yusuf, son of Mohamed Yusuf, left the Sambisa forest, rallying others in the Alagarno forest, west of Sambisa, and at Lake Chad. They all resettled in the Lake Chad area, and later took control of Alagarno.

The breakaway group only informed ISIS of its decision once the split was a *fait accompli*. Embarrassed at another instance of factionalism in jihad, ISIS encouraged Yusuf to stay away from Shekau but to refrain from attacking him. But at the same time, it immediately redirected funding to Yusuf's faction. This money was crucial, one follower of Yusuf reported, because times were hard in the early days after the split: "Grasshoppers came. We started eating *njara* leaves, and then even those ran out".

The fighters shared the cash, with single men receiving one-off sums of 5,000 nairas (\$12) and those with families receiving 10,000 nairas (\$24).

Meanwhile, ISIS tried unsuccessfully to reconcile the factions. It first brokered a truce that allowed some families of Yusuf's party to leave the Sambisa forest for Lake Chad. Two defectors said al-Baghdadi himself held a three-way call with Shekau and Yusuf to iron things out. Islamic State suggested at one point that Yusuf remain under Shekau's command but stay posted at Lake Chad as a *wazir* (a sort of deputy). Yusuf's group refused. Eventually, in August 2016, months after the split, the ISIS magazine *al-Naba* introduced Yusuf as the *wali* of ISWAP, making no mention of Shekau. The latter reacted promptly, insisting in an audio recording released on 3 August 2016 that ISIS had been tricked.

After the Split

After the split, relations between ISIS and the new ISWAP leadership remained close. Money and advice kept coming. The defectors interviewed by Crisis Group said a few ISWAP associates circulated outside Nigeria to meet with ISIS representatives in Libya, Sudan and the Gulf. Before their departure from the group, the defectors did not see any more Arab trainers coming from Libya or elsewhere. Civilian sources who frequently visit ISWAP territory have mentioned to Crisis Group that a few possibly Arab trainers were present at a later point.

Whether or not ISIS sent officials to Nigeria after its decline in the Levant remains unclear. What is clear, however, is that ISWAP has continued to progress in adopting the global movement's doctrines on governance and other matters. For example, as Crisis Group has documented [elsewhere](#), ISWAP tried, with some success, to mend fences with Muslim civilians in the areas under its influence, facilitating movement and trade, patrolling roads and providing

basic services, thus attempting to emulate the ISIS call to build a sustainable economic base.

Where Shekau alienated civilians with his capricious and often massive and violent seizures of cattle and grain, ISWAP has substituted a fairer, cash-based taxation of trade and agricultural production (notably cattle and fish). It has also adopted *idariya*, a computer-based accounting system that ISIS has promoted, and which ISWAP managed locally on laptops fired by solar panels.

ISWAP has pushed ahead with military reforms along the lines of the earlier ISIS suggestions that Shekau largely ignored. It has done away with child soldiers and female bombers, consolidated the *amniya*, and created a standing army. The last step compels its members to choose between professional soldiering and civilian life (though it can still mobilise civilian members for defensive operations). For the fighters, uniforms with unit tags are in frequent use – according to one defector,

the tags are useful in triage, helping identify the dead and sort the wounded.

These reforms have clearly played a part in ISWAP's growing professionalism, which African and Western military officers familiar with Lake Chad events have noted to Crisis Group.

That professionalism in turn explains ISWAP's military successes in 2017 and 2018 and its spike in activity in 2020. Since 2016, ISWAP has launched more attacks and has caused far more casualties among the military than Shekau's JAS.

Lessons from Lake Chad

The defectors' testimonies hold a number of lessons. The most obvious is that the relationship between the Lake Chad militants and ISIS has been beneficial to both sides. Backing jihad in Nigeria and elsewhere has helped ISIS keep its brand alive, despite losing its territorial hold in the Levant. The promotion of ISWAP operations in ISIS media, from *al-Naba* magazine to its press agency Amaq, demonstrates ISIS's appetite for plugging the local franchise, particularly at a time when the ISIS core is on the back foot in Iraq and Syria. Nigerian jihadists, too, have gained, not just in symbolic terms, but concretely. The ideological guidance, technological and combat training, management advice and the little cash they have received have all served to help them sharpen their discipline and effectiveness on the battlefield. It is evident that even small amounts of support from ISIS can have a big impact on the ground.

That said, some limits to ISIS's influence are apparent. As the defectors narrate, ISIS never exerted command and control over ISWAP. Indeed, Shekau felt confident enough at times to disregard the guidance of ISIS, which in turn had little choice but to tolerate this apparent insubordination. ISIS could not avert ISWAP's 2016 split, despite its evident frustration at the rupture. Nor could ISIS transform the local Lake Chad franchise into a more global threat,

determined and able to perpetrate attacks further afield, though whether that was ever ISIS's intention is unclear – it may simply have sought to benefit from ISWAP's local prowess to amplify its brand.

Whether ISIS will seek greater clout over the Lake Chad insurgency in the future is unclear. Since 2018, when the last of the interviewed defectors left the group, some observers have claimed that ISIS is pushing for greater control of ISWAP. Nigerian analyst Fulan Nasrullah, for example, insists that ISIS exerts [growing influence](#) through fighters it trained in Libya and who are now returning to their native Lake Chad region. There is even speculation that a recent round of internal tensions, which has resulted in the killing of major ISWAP figures, including [Mamman Nur](#) in 2018 and [Ba Idrissa](#) in 2020, had to do with ISIS wanting to clean house and exercise more direct authority.

Lastly, it is clear that nurturing relationships with and talking to defectors can be hugely valuable for researchers and governments, given how much it can reveal about how things really work on the ground. In the months ahead, Crisis Group will publish more work based on interviews with individuals who have voluntarily left Boko Haram and its offshoots, so as to shed light on what motivates recruits to stay with, or quit, jihadist groups.