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Fighting among Boko Haram Splinters Rages On

Two years after the suicide of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, jihadist factions continue a battle for control of Nigeria's north east. In this Q&A, Crisis Group assesses the situation and lays out what authorities should do in response.



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What is happening?

Rival jihadist groups are fighting for control of swathes of north-eastern Nigeria, centred in Borno state on the borders with Cameroon, Chad and Niger, a topographically diverse region encompassing grasslands, forests, mountains and the marshy shores of Lake Chad. The groups are all descended from the insurgency known as Boko Haram, which launched a rebellion against the Nigerian state beginning in 2009. The jihadist infighting – which amounts to a conflict within a conflict, since all four Lake Chad state armies are engaged in counter-insurgency operations – has displaced thousands of people, adding to the hundreds of thousands already driven from their homes by years of instability. In some ways, the intra-jihadist melee is likely aiding the Lake Chad states' war effort, as the militants train their gunsights on one another, but the capitals should not grow complacent. Should the various former Boko Haram factions

reunite, the larger war could spread to other parts of Nigeria or even outside it.

The jihadists have been battling for some time, but their struggle intensified a great deal following the killing of Boko Haram's original chieftain, Abubakar Shekau, in May 2021. Shekau became the top leader of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS, which is often referred to as Boko Haram) when the group mounted its insurrection. He was notorious for the brutality he sanctioned in subduing the civilians in JAS's path. From bases in the Sambisa forest, he oversaw a campaign of sectarian predation in the Lake Chad basin. Labelling residents as infidels (though most are Muslims), JAS fighters plundered villages and towns and massacred the residents. The organisation also enlisted women and girls as suicide bombers. Shekau earned a moment of global infamy in April 2014, after militants under his command kidnapped more than 200 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok. Some of the girls are still held captive years later.

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These tactics contributed to a split in Boko Haram's ranks. In 2016, partly because they viewed the group's atrocities against civilians as counterproductive, a group of militants broke away from Shekau. They set up camp on the banks and islands of Lake Chad, in the north of Nigeria's Borno state, and secured the recognition of the Islamic State, becoming the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). The breakaway faction began competing with Shekau's JAS for dominance in the region. In this confrontation, it enjoyed a number of advantages. Its base lay in borderlands that states struggled to police, with natural defences and ample resources including fish, farmland and pasture – allowing it to build up its forces and fill its coffers. As the Islamic State's local franchise, it initially benefited from that quarter's advice and financial support.

ISWAP eventually brought about Shekau's demise. In May 2021, it set out to reunify the jihadist forces, launching an offensive in JAS's stronghold in the Sambisa forest. Shekau's fighters were already on the defensive, hemmed in by the Nigerian military, notably its air attacks. ISWAP advanced into Sambisa with such ease, JAS defectors have told Crisis

Group, that it seemed the group had cut a deal with Shekau's commanders. The ISWAP fighters hunted Shekau down. When offered a chance to surrender, he detonated his suicide vest.

What has changed since Shekau's death?

The picture on the ground is mixed. Shekau's killing brought civilians a degree of relief, but their plight is still dire. Meanwhile, the jihadists have turned their guns on each other, with ISWAP trying to consolidate the gains it hoped it would draw from eliminating its rival's leader. JAS is indeed fractured and diminished. But ISWAP has not scored the decisive victory it was aiming for. Indeed, in reigniting the jihadist civil war, it may end up weakening itself as well.

Due to the intra-jihadist conflict, the Lake Chad basin remains highly dangerous, with many displaced people prevented from returning to their homes. Displacement has actually increased, as a number of civilians who lived in areas under JAS control have left for new [locations](#) including garrison towns and informal settlements. The UN Refugee Agency said in March that 2.4 million people were still uprooted as a result of instability in Nigeria's north east. Renewed displacement as well as [hasty relocations](#) have aggravated food insecurity. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that 1.9 million people in Nigeria's Borno state will require food assistance in June and August.

On the battlefield, ISWAP remains dominant. It took over the Sambisa forest, adding to the rural areas it controls in northern Borno, notably the southern shores of Lake Chad and the Alagarno forest on the Yobe state boundary. ISWAP has instituted a semblance of governance in these areas, in part by taking a [more moderate stance](#) toward civilians than JAS. JAS regards all civilians as fair game for plunder: it frequently steals crops, livestock and other items, rendering travel so unsafe that people are afraid to take goods to market. ISWAP, on the other hand, guarantees people freedom of movement, allowing them to engage in normal commerce, though it taxes the proceeds. Soon after Shekau's death, ISWAP reached out to JAS units, offering to absorb them on the condition that they cease ransacking villages and attacking civilians. To ensure that its new recruits would honour these terms, it confiscated their guns, storing them in armouries – it is ISWAP's policy to limit the circulation of weapons and hand them out only when it needs extra firepower for large-scale operations. It was thus able to attract a number of JAS commanders, but not many fighters, who were alienated when ISWAP began to disarm them.

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JAS is now a much weaker force, but it is hardly vanquished. Estimates are unreliable, but most believe that at least 3,000 JAS fighters surrendered to the Nigerian authorities following Shekau's death. JAS still has several thousand men under arms, however, though ISWAP's ranks are most likely larger. Other JAS cells have resumed fighting ISWAP, as well as the Nigerian and Cameroonian armies. They have also restarted their predation on civilians.

One major JAS group – led by Ibrahim Bakura Doro – has been a formidable enemy of ISWAP ever since Shekau's death. It is based on the northern shores of Lake Chad, between Chad and Niger. It has repeatedly attacked ISWAP positions around the lake and succeeded in winning over ISWAP fighters among the ethnic Buduma, the autochthonous population of the area. Several ISWAP defectors, along with security sources, say JAS has taken control of a group of islands in the Nigerian part of Lake Chad, including Tumbun Gini, where ISWAP once had its headquarters.

JAS also controls much of the Mandara mountains, from which it has stepped up attacks in the Far North region of Cameroon. JAS also has small fighting groups in parts of Borno state, notably in the local government areas of Bama and Konduga, east of Maiduguri, the state capital.

JAS is also riven with internal tensions. In March 2022, Bakura Doro ordered the killing of Bakura Sahalaba, with whom he previously co-led the group, possibly because Sahalaba was pushing for reconciliation with ISWAP. Bakura Doro then took over as sole imam. Most of the faction has stayed loyal to him, but a cell near Gazuwa, in Borno's Bama local government area, refused to follow him and is fighting on independently.

According to defectors interviewed by Crisis Group, JAS and ISWAP have repeatedly held negotiations to put an end to their fighting, reportedly including with the facilitation of Islamic State militants from elsewhere, but these efforts have failed so far. JAS leaders reject ISWAP's more bureaucratic governance model – the mix of plunder and sectarianism that is at the heart of JAS remains attractive to a number of militants.

What comes next?

The fighting could develop in various ways. The jihadists are hardened guerrillas: patient, mobile and resilient. Government offensives meet with only limited success. The fighters simply withdraw, hiding out and harassing the army with occasional raids, while they wait for the offensive to end. On the other hand, there are positive indicators on the ground: according to the [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project](#), the number of attacks on civilians and government forces has dropped since the end of 2022.

The primary reason for the dip in attacks is probably that the jihadists are fighting each other so fiercely. Keeping a count is difficult, but ISWAP and JAS together have perhaps lost several hundred fighters. Continuing factional war is likely to feed further defections from both groups. For several years, the Nigerian military has been running a [program intended to help jihadist defectors](#) rejoin society. Right after Shekau's death, Borno state's governor, Babagana Zulum, launched a similar initiative of his own, which has had some success as well.

Reconciliation between the warring jihadist factions is still possible.

Yet amid all the churn, reconciliation between the warring jihadist factions is still possible. Both JAS and ISWAP say they want to rule quasi-states according to puritanical understandings of Islamic law. Their strategies are still very different, though there are signs that, in the Lake Chad area, the Bakura Doro group has been taking a leaf from ISWAP's book and taxing the population rather than pillaging them. If ISWAP and JAS find a way to mend relations, merge or somehow coexist, the jihadist threat may grow, as the groups may step up efforts to strike outside Nigeria's north east. In 2022 and 2023, ISWAP claimed a series of attacks in northern (Niger and Jigawa), central (Taraba, Kogi and the federal capital) and southern states (Ondo).

Another major question is Abuja's strategy. President Muhammadu Buhari's administration beefed up the military response to the jihadist threat, though it faced so many security challenges in other parts of the country that it could not defeat the militants in the north east. Meanwhile, President-elect Bola Tinubu, who prevailed in the country's 25 February elections, said little about the instability in the north east on the campaign trail, offering few clues as to how he might change the government's approach when he takes office on 29 May.

A new offensive by the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which focuses on the borderlands of the Lake Chad states, notably the lake's banks and islands, is under way. The force has staged such a campaign every year since it was established in 2014, but so far without shifting the dial. It remains to be seen if this one can. Another possibly important development is that Borno state has recruited JAS defectors for a militia that participates in counter-insurgency operations alongside the military.

What can be done?

First, it is essential that the new Nigerian authorities not lose interest in efforts to bring peace to Borno state, which have been wracked by the conflict since 2009. For about a decade, the authorities have been prematurely announcing the jihadist forces' collapse. During the 2023 electoral campaign, contrary to the previous two cycles, the presidential candidates barely discussed the situation in the north east, suggesting that it may not be a top priority. Perhaps the fact that the vice president-elect, Kashim Shettima, is a former governor of Borno state who was once close to Governor Zulum will ensure that the new government pays sufficient attention to the north east. What is clear is that betting that jihadist infighting will continue – in effect, solving Abuja's problem for it – is not wise. The militants have repeatedly shown their capacity to adapt; they could well work out a compromise with one another, again posing a formidable challenge in north-eastern Nigeria and the neighbourhood.

Secondly, authorities should sustain policies that have shown promise, notably those aimed at defectors. The jihadist civil war, if it continues, is likely to create new waves of defectors, as it did in 2016 and 2021. The Lake Chad states have all launched laudable efforts to encourage defection and reintegration. They should persevere with these programs, though all of them, particularly Zulum's new initiative, badly need more resources to handle the thousands of defectors who have signed up. The idea that Boko Haram members could re-enter society was largely unthinkable eight years ago in Nigeria. It is still controversial, especially outside affected areas in the north east, but it has been happening. It is important to keep these efforts up, finding the right balance between making exit from militancy sustainable and managing public opinion, a segment of which is wary that perpetrators of violence are being rewarded.

Thirdly, they should be cautious about forming civilian militias to fight alongside the army, a move that has produced gains in some places but backfired in others. At minimum, it requires serious oversight.

Lastly, and as [Crisis Group has written previously](#), it is unlikely that authorities can defeat the militants through military means alone. For now, the Lake Chad basin governments should continue to contain the militants' advances. They should all also keep exploring negotiations with militant factions, particularly JAS militants who have shown some interest in talks. Over time – and although there is a long way to go – better service delivery might curb jihadists' ability to recruit in the basin's chronically neglected rural areas. After decades of suffering, the populations in these areas deserve civilian administration and military action that is more responsive to its needs.