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Unseen advances, quiet offensives: ISWAP's strategic resurgence and the limits of Nigeria's military response

By Malik Samuel

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Executive summary

This report examines emerging evidence of a potential resurgence of Boko Haram, particularly its Islamic State-aligned faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), following a period of relative decline. Indicators of renewed activity include a significant increase in attacks across northeast Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin, with over 300 incidents recorded in 2025 alone. ISWAP has overrun at least 16 military bases in the first half of the year, showcasing enhanced tactical sophistication, drone usage, coordinated offensives, and presence of foreign fighters. These developments reflect improved logistics, reorganisation of ISWAP's territorial command structure, and sustained external support from ISIS central.

ISWAP's strategic recalibration appears to be driven in part by intra-ISIS competition and an ambition to reaffirm its position as a leading franchise. The group has intensified propaganda campaigns and scaled up recruitment, particularly targeting youth in underserved communities and across West Africa and the Sahel. Socioeconomic grievances, chiefly unemployment and lack of education, continue to serve as enablers of violent extremism. Insecurity has been further compounded by the withdrawal of Niger from the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), weakening regional coordination.

Despite efforts such as Borno State's reintegration and CVE strategies, current military and policy responses remain largely reactive and insufficiently informed by the evolving dynamics of the insurgency. The report underscores the need for a multifaceted approach, combining strengthened military capacity with regional cooperation and addressing the root causes of recruitment and radicalisation.

Introduction

Boko Haram's historical trajectory: contextual overview

The Boko Haram insurgency, now in its 16th year, remains one of the most enduring and complex security challenges facing Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin. Originating in the early 2000s under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf, the group transitioned from a non-violent religious movement to a full-blown armed insurgency following the July 2009 uprising and the extrajudicial killing of its founder. Between 2011 and 2014, Boko Haram reached the height of its power, controlling vast swathes of territory in northeastern Nigeria, estimated to be the size of Belgium, and establishing what Shekau called Dawlah (Islamic State). This followed the capture of Gwoza, Bama, Dikwa, Madagali, and Banki. This period was marked by widespread violence, including mass casualty attacks, suicide bombings, and high-profile abductions, most notably the 2014 Chibok schoolgirls' kidnapping.

The regionalisation of the conflict, with violence spilling into Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, prompted the African Union's endorsement of a revitalised Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in 2015. Military offensives, combined with internal fragmentation – especially the 2016 schism that gave rise to the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) – led to the erosion of Boko Haram's territorial control. The death of Abubakar Shekau in 2021, during clashes with ISWAP, was a watershed moment, significantly weakening the Shekau-led faction (commonly referred to as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lidda'awati wal-Jihad or JAS) and shifting insurgent dominance to ISWAP.

Despite these setbacks, JAS did not collapse entirely. Under the leadership of Bakura Doro, and with support from influential commanders in the Mandara Mountains and Nigeria's northwest and northcentral regions, JAS has continued limited operations. The group has maintained a presence in parts of the Lake Chad region, benefiting



Photo: Screenshot from ISIS propaganda video

إحراق منازل النصارى بهجوم المجهدين على قرية (بوبا) بمنطقة (أداماوا)

شعبان 1446



WEST AFRICA

Civilian community targeted by ISWAP in northeast Nigeria.

from inter-group rivalries, especially its escalating conflict with ISWAP from 2022 to 2024¹. These clashes, fuelled by grievances over Shekau’s death and competition for resources and territory, temporarily subdued insurgent operations but did not dismantle either faction. By late 2024, ISWAP had not only recovered but appeared to be reasserting itself, marked by intensified attacks, expanded territorial reach, and strategic restructuring.

This report investigates the evidence for ISWAP’s resurgence, with particular focus on its recent activities. It explores the underlying drivers of renewed violence, including internal reorganisations, ideological motivations, external support from ISIS, and enduring structural weaknesses within Nigeria’s security apparatus.

The report focuses primarily on ISWAP’s military component, rather than its administrative structures. This emphasis is informed by the centrality of the military wing, which constitutes the most powerful and operationally significant arm of the group. A detailed understanding of the military structure and its operational dynamics is essential for the formulation of effective and urgent counterinsurgency strategies by government forces. While this does not diminish the relevance of ISWAP’s other organs, such as its administrative, judicial, or propaganda arms, references to these components will be made where necessary to provide contextual clarity.

Drawing on extensive field research, including interviews with ex-combatants, community leaders, security officials, humanitarian actors, as well as analysis of media reports and propaganda communications, the report seeks to assess ISWAP’s ‘comeback’ and what this means for regional security. It concludes by offering policy recommendations tailored to countering the evolving threat landscape in northeast Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin.

Evidence of resurgence

Increased attacks and civilian casualties

JAS and ISWAP reportedly carried out more than 300 attacks in the first quarter of 2025 in Nigeria, resulting in over 500 deaths². Most of the attacks were carried out in northeast Nigeria. JAS was responsible for most of the attacks and casualties, with almost daily attacks on civilians in Borno state. At least 400 civilians have been killed during JAS attacks. This is not surprising, given that JAS relies a lot on its civilian predation for logistics and supplies, including food. ISWAP’s attacks, on the other hand, resulted in at least 100 civilian deaths, with most of these deaths occurring in Christian-dominated communities in southern Borno and northern Adamawa states. The other deaths were a result of ISWAP punishing civilians for cooperating with security forces through the

1 See <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/b196-jas-vs-iswap-war-boko-haram-splinters>

2 See: <https://www.thisdaylive.com/2025/04/24/the-resurgence-of-boko-haram-3/>



Targeted execution of civilians by ISWAP.

provision of information on its activities and movements³. Otherwise, ISWAP's major targets are security forces, government officials, aid workers and non-Muslim civilians. It is important to note that these casualty figures could be higher because several attacks are not documented or reported because of a lack of access to many areas under the control of both groups.

The attacks on civilians are a continuation of the conflict dynamics from the second half of 2024, where ISWAP was particularly brutal against civilians. Between June and November 2024, the group killed at least 269 civilians in five attacks. In three of these attacks – Faduma Koloram (Gubio LGA of Borno state), Usmanti (Ngazai LGA of Borno state), and Muri Mafa (Tarmuwa LGA of Yobe state) – ISWAP accused the villagers of collaborating with security agents. In the other two attacks, the civilians were killed for disobeying ISWAP's orders. For instance, on 11 October, 12 fishermen were kidnapped in Dumba village of Kukawa LGA of Borno state and later executed for fishing without permission. ISWAP had told the people that fishing would only commence after the deployment of its revenue collectors to the location. Similarly, on 12 November, 11 IDPs were executed for cutting trees in Gajibo, near Gamboru Ngala, despite ISWAP warning civilians that cutting trees in that location would contribute to desertification, thereby exposing its activities and movements to security forces.

Perhaps the most striking incident that demonstrated ISWAP's brutality against civilians was the execution of more than 120 villagers in Faduma Koloram on 10 June 2024. According to locals, on that day, a few ISWAP fighters passing through the village were attacked by local vigilantes using bows and arrows, resulting in injuries to two fighters. When the fighters later died from their wounds, ISWAP demanded that the villagers identify those responsible and send emissaries to offer condolences. The community's refusal to comply led to a retaliatory attack in which villagers said they buried 125 bodies.

Similarly, on 1 September 2024, ISWAP fighters attacked the town of Muri Mafa in Tarmuwa LGA, Yobe State, opening fire on three mosques and killing at least 86 people. The assault was a reprisal for a July incident in which villagers reported five ISWAP operatives resting outside the town, leading to the death of four of them in a military ambush. According to sources, the ISWAP members had been part of a surveillance mission and were awaiting the delivery of logistics, nine motorcycles purchased in Kano and en route to ISWAP-held islands. The group later accused the villagers of enabling the interception of these assets, warning of punishment.

The incidents in Faduma Koloram and Muri Mafa illustrate ISWAP's use of retaliatory violence and coercive governance to enforce civilian compliance. In both cases,

3 ISWAP's policy prohibits the targeting of Muslim civilians, except in cases where individuals are deemed to have collaborated with security forces or disobeyed the group's directives.



Photo: Screenshot from ISIS propaganda video

Above and below: Seized military weapons and ammunition.

community actions perceived as hostile – either harming ISWAP fighters or aiding state forces – led to mass reprisal attacks, demonstrating the group’s strategy of collective punishment. These events also reveal ISWAP’s dependence on local logistics networks and its willingness to violently respond when these are compromised. Additionally, the calculated nature of the reprisals, including prior warnings, reflects ISWAP’s strategic intent and discipline, reinforcing its authority through fear while deterring civilian collaboration with the state.

Successful overrunning of military bases

This marks ISWAP’s most militarily successful period since the 2016 Boko Haram split, as evidenced by its ability to overrun fortified military installations, expand its territorial reach, and sustain a high tempo of coordinated attacks across multiple fronts.

As of June 2025, ISWAP has overrun⁴ at least 16 military bases in Nigeria – Mallam Fatori, Pulka, Goniri, Bita, Buratai, Bulabulin, Wajiroko, Sabon Gari, Kumshe (overrun twice), Limankara, Buni Gari, Marte, Rann, Wulgo, Kanama, Gajibo – in Borno and Yobe states. The tactical sophistication of these attacks, including their timing (mostly nocturnal) and precision, underscores a growing threat.

These developments, occurring alongside other attacks in Niger and Cameroon, signal that ISWAP is no longer in

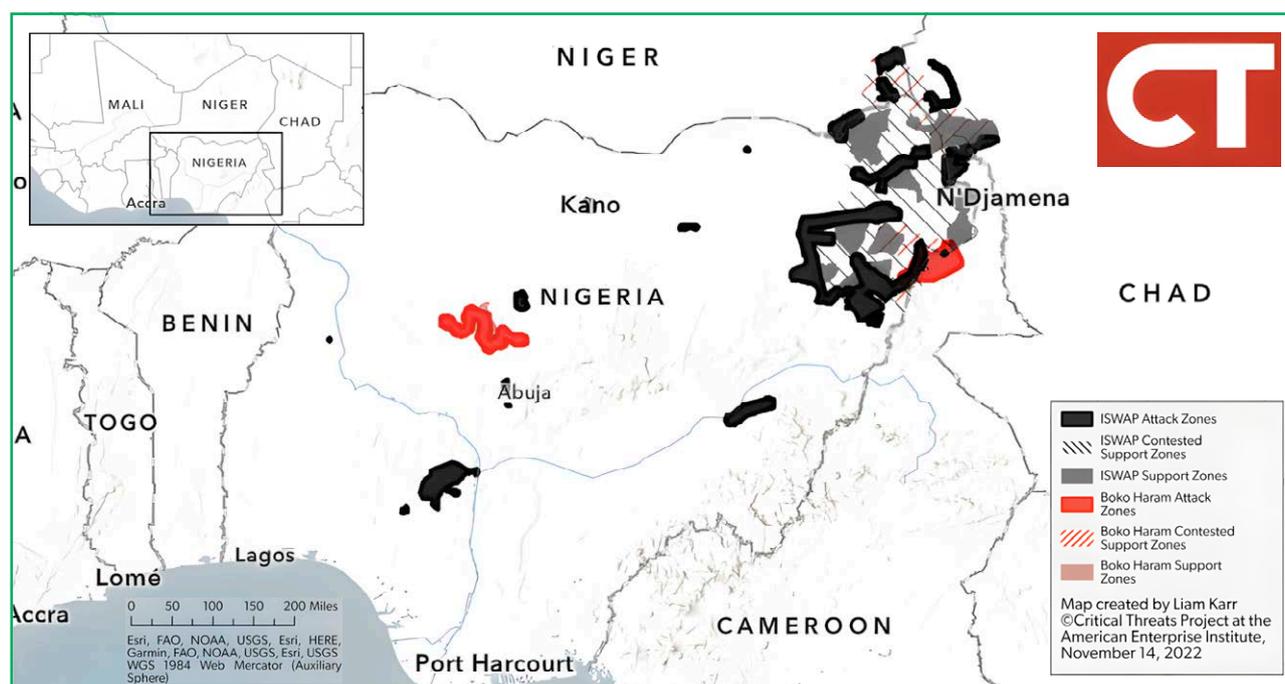
a phase of mere survival or hit-and-run tactics, or what Nigerian politicians call ‘the last kick of a dying horse’. ISWAP has demonstrated renewed offensive momentum, bolstered by better logistics, weaponry, tactics and coordination with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Among the most significant attacks on military bases in 2025 was the four-hour coordinated assault on the



Photo: Screenshot from ISIS propaganda video

4 These were bases that were taken over, even if temporarily, by ISWAP after overpowering the soldiers and causing them to flee.



Salafi-Jihadi areas of operation in the Lake Chad Region as of November 10, 2022.

27 Task Force Brigade – one of the more fortified formations in the northeast – in Buni Gari, Yobe State. In this attack, ISWAP forces dislodged the Nigerian Army brigade, forcing personnel to retreat while insurgents looted and set ablaze key military infrastructure. Three soldiers were killed in the attack.

Several vehicles, including Mine-Resistance Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles and Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs), were destroyed, and weapons were seized. ISWAP, via its Amaq News Agency, released pictures from the attack, showing a military ambulance among the vehicles it seized. It also claimed to have killed three soldiers, destroyed ten vehicles, and captured three, along with various weapon systems. Military sources corroborated many of these claims, confirming the destruction of critical assets, including the commander’s residence and orderly room. The dislodgement of a full brigade – not merely a remote outpost – reflects ISWAP’s regained capability to challenge even fortified military positions.

These incidents raise fundamental concerns about the Nigerian military’s operational preparedness and intelligence posture. The ability of insurgents to carry out sustained assaults, loot military infrastructure, and withdraw unscathed indicates not only tactical flaws but potentially deeper concerns regarding insecurity in other parts of the country.

Factors contributing to ISWAP’s resurgence

Increased territorial control, reorganisation and mobility

ISWAP’s control of strategic locations since 2021 and its ability to restructure have enabled it to reach more targets in less time than before. Before the death of Shekau, ISWAP had challenges launching attacks in Cameroon’s Far North and Adamawa state in Nigeria because of the distance and risk of confrontation with security forces or JAS, which control of Sambisa forest and the Mandara Mountains, putting communities in these locations within its areas of influence. In fact, before the capture of Sambisa, ISWAP’s attacks outside northern Borno were mainly limited to Damboa, Chibok and Biu local governments because of its Farouk base in Alagarno Forest in the Damboa local government area.

With the capture of Sambisa, ISWAP is now able to launch attacks in Far North Cameroon and communities in northern Adamawa state in Nigeria⁵.

Former ISWAP fighters said the go-ahead for the capture of Sambisa came from ISIS. According to these sources, ISIS informed ISWAP that if it desired to significantly expand outside its traditional Lake Chad Basin bases, it needed to take over Sambisa. Doing so would bring it closer to targets,

5 See <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2025/06/02/resurgent-jihadist-violence-northeast-nigeria-part-worrying-regional-trend>

reduce travel time and logistical costs, and minimise the risks faced by its fighters.

The capture of Sambisa Forest marked a turning point for ISWAP, coinciding with a period of elevated morale within the group, largely due to the return of Abu Musab al-Barnawi as interim⁶ Wali (governor) with a mandate to reform and consolidate the organisation. Following this strategic victory, ISWAP undertook a major internal reorganisation, initially restructuring itself into two main Wilayah (provinces): Buhaira (also known as Kangar) and Farouk (also referred to as Timbuktu)⁷. Each Wilayah was further subdivided into administrative and operational zones known as Mantiqat (districts), with the Wilayah itself also retaining the status of a Mantiqa. Under this arrangement, Farouk, Sambisa, and Banki were designated as Mantiqat within Wilayah Farouk, while Buhaira and Krenowa were established as Mantiqat under Wilayah Buhaira. ISWAP then appointed a Wali to govern each Wilayah and Amir al-Mantiqa (district commanders) to oversee the respective zones. The Wali exercises a degree of semi-autonomous authority over both governance and military affairs, while the Mantiqat are overseen by an Amir al-Mantiqa. In some cases, the Amir al-Mantiqa may also serve concurrently as the Amir al-Fiya, the most senior military commander within the district, depending on the number of subordinate military commanders (Fiya) present.

According to individuals familiar with ISWAP's internal structure – including senior former fighters who left the group within the past year – there are currently three established Wilayah within the Lake Chad Basin, all located in Borno State. These sources say that Krenowa was elevated to the status of a Wilayah over two years ago, thereby separating it from its original administrative

linkage to Wilayah Buhaira. In addition, a fourth Wilayah, known as Wilayah Shimali Nigeria⁸, has been established outside the northeast and is responsible for overseeing ISWAP's operations across northwest and northcentral Nigeria. At the time of writing, discussions were ongoing regarding the elevation of Banki to Wilayah status. Although currently operating independently from Wilayah Farouk, Banki is expected to become a full Wilayah once a Wali is appointed. Presently, it is led by an Amir al-Jaish (military commander), who reports to ISWAP's deputy supervisory Wali, Bana Chingori⁹.

Following his return to Buhaira from the capture of Sambisa, al-Barnawi later stepped down from his position as interim Wali and appointed Abu Jabir, also known as Baban Jabir¹⁰, as Wali for Buhaira, while Mallam Bako Gorgore was made Wali for Farouk. Al-Barnawi took the position of supervisory Wali, effectively overseeing the two Wulat (plural of Wali). He was referred to by the Hausa phrase, *Walin Walaye* (Wali of the 'Walis' or governor of governors). It is not clear why he took that decision, but it is possible that he had information about his coming promotion as ISIS administrator for West Africa and the Sahel or, more likely, that he needed time to recover from the gunshot wound he sustained when JAS fighters attacked Tumbumma on 11 August 2021¹¹. For the rest of the year, the only news about al-Barnawi was that he was dead, information released by the Nigerian military¹².

It is likely that al-Barnawi was appointed as head of West Africa and the Sahel at the end of 2021 while still nursing his injuries¹³. In 2022, after recovering from his injuries, al-Barnawi gave up his supervisory Wali role and appointed Ba Shuwa, the then Amir al-Jaish for Wilayah Farouk, as his replacement. He also appointed Bor Mainok, a close ally, as his deputy/adviser in his new role of overseeing

6 Sources familiar with ISWAP's internal dynamics report that ISIS was compelled to dissolve ISWAP's entire leadership around late 2020 or early 2021 due to internal power struggles, which had led to defections and factional disputes. To prevent a leadership vacuum, al-Barnawi was appointed as interim Wali until the group could reorganise and establish a new leadership structure.

7 See https://unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/UNIDIR_Boko-Haram_Mapping_an_Evolving_Armed_Constellation.pdf

8 This Wilayah is responsible for the expansion of ISWAP outside northeast Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin to northwest and northcentral Nigeria.

9 Bana Chingori deputises Ba Shuwa, the Supervisory Wali that oversees all ISWAP's Wulat. Chingori was appointed as Shuwa's deputy in June 2024. Before his appointment, he was Amir al-Jaish for Wilayah Farouk, a post also previously held by Shuwa.

10 Abu Jabir was killed in early 2023, with Ba Shuwa combining his role as supervisory Wali with caretaker Wali for Buhaira. Around August/September 2024, ISWAP appointed an interim Wali, Bilal Abdullahi aka Abu Hafsa. Bilal served until November when he was replaced by a substantive Wali, Ismail Yakoub, best known as Abu Darda.

11 ISWAP had attacked Barwa, where JAS leader Bakura Doro is based, on 6 August 2021 but suffered a great loss. 12 of its 20 vehicles were destroyed with IEDs, forcing its withdrawal. Five days later, JAS retaliated with a reprisal attack on Tumbumma. It was during this attack that al-Barnawi was shot in the leg.

12 See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58576635>. Sources say al-Barnawi was treated for his injuries outside Nigeria, but the location was not disclosed. Two months after sustaining the injuries, his condition reportedly got worse. So, in October 2021, accompanied by an ISWAP doctor and a couple of his bodyguards, he was taken outside for treatment. The doctor reportedly returned in February 2022, reporting to the Shura Council that al-Barnawi was close to full recovery. He returned to Nigeria around June 2022.

13 Although some sources indicate that al-Barnawi was appointed to a senior ISIS position in 2016 (see: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-general-directorate-of-provinces-managing-the-islamic-states-global-network/>), interviewees for this report stated that his appointment occurred in 2021. This timeline is more plausible given that al-Barnawi became Wali only in late 2016 after the split from Shekau, and by 2018 had been removed through an internal coup led by then Amir al-Jaish, Mustapha Krimima. Following his ouster, al-Barnawi lost communication with ISIS, while his brother, Abu Rumaisa, who served as media head and ISIS liaison, was also dismissed for defying Krimima. Krimima not only installed Ba Idrissa as Wali but later replaced him with Ba Lawan, accusing Ba Idrissa of fraternizing with rivals like al-Barnawi. Al-Barnawi's return to leadership came after he orchestrated another internal coup: during a Shura Council meeting, one of his allies reportedly smuggled in a pistol (weapons are not allowed into Shura Council meetings) and threatened Krimima, forcing him to accept Ba Lawan's removal and al-Barnawi's reinstatement.

West Africa and the Sahel. Those interviewed, including a former ISWAP shura council member, say he is referred to as *al-Lajna al-Mufawwada* (The Delegated Committee), also suggesting al-Barnawi's membership of ISIS's powerful executive organ that is only behind the Caliph in terms of decision making.

ISWAP continues to restructure and make appointments to replace killed leaders, non-performing or disobedient ones and reward brave and loyal ones. For instance, a previous Wali for Farouk, Mustapha Umar, was reportedly demoted to deputy Wali for disrespecting Ba Shuwa. His demotion, instead of a more severe punishment, was regarded as a soft landing, given his demonstrated commitment to the group, including his pivotal role during the 2022 Kuje prison break, where, as an inmate, he served as a rallying figure for other ISWAP detainees¹⁴. Sometimes, the appointments are simply for strategic reasons and specific tasks, such as redeploying a brave commander to a location where fighters are facing challenges from security forces.

Key figures within ISWAP military leadership

- ISIS head of West Africa and the Sahel: Abu Musab al-Barnawi¹⁵ (deputised by Bor Mainok)
- Supervisory Wali: Ba Shuwa (deputised by Bana Chingori)
- Amir al-Jaish: Ibrahim Mohammed Yusuf
- Chief Judge: Mamman Khalifa
- Police chief: Dahiru Baga
- Amir al-Amn: Dalilu
- Amir al-Ta'zir (commander of disciplinary affairs, only applicable to fighters): Ibrahim Zubairu

ISWAP's territorial and nominal provinces

Wilayat Buhaira

- Wali: Ismail Yakub, aka Abu Darda
- Amir al-Jaish: Ibrahim Mohammed Yusuf
- Amir al-Fiya: Bilal Mustapha
- Fiya: Hamza Ali aka Abu Hamza, Mallam Basiru, Ibrahim Yakub

Wilayat Farouk

- Wali: Ibrahim Ayuba, aka Abu Ayub (deputised by Mustapha Umar aka Abu Hajara)
- Amir al-Jaish: Hussaini Kiriku (deputised by Ibrahim Hanzala)
- Piya: Ibrahim Hanzala, Mohammed Bako

Wilayah Krenowa

- Wali: Abu Salim
- Amir al-Jaish: Unknown
- Amir al-Fiya: Unknown
- Fiya: Unknown

Banki (not yet a Wilayat but independent of any existing Wilayat)

- Amir al-Jaish: Abu Mohammed (reports to Bana Chingori)
- Piya: Ibrahim Muktar and Suleiman Ali

Wilayah Shimali Nigeria (nominal province)

- Wali: Ba Idrissa and Abubakar Suleiman aka Abu Ikrima*
- Amir al-Jaish: Ali Abdallah, aka Ali Baga, aka Abdullahi Baga
- Fiya: Three groups, with the first two reporting to Ba Idrissa while the third reports to Ikrima.
 1. Abubakar Haruna, Mallam Mustapha and Auwal Ali (in charge of Nasarawa, Federal Capital Territory, Plateau, Bauchi and Niger)
 2. Umar Abdullahi, Ahmed Ibrahim and Mustapha Haroun, reportedly a Chadian (in charge of Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Zamfara)
 3. Unknown but will oversee Kogi, Edo, Kwara.

*Shimali Nigeria, which is an ISWAP's declared-but-undeveloped province comprises two Wulat, Ba Idrissa and Abu Ikrima. The province is also further subdivided into three, with Ba Idrissa overseeing two, and Abu Ikrima overseeing the third.

¹⁴ Sources also credited him with recording an audio message from prison in support of Mamman Nur and al-Barnawi's 2016 split from Shekau. In the message, which was widely circulated among Boko Haram members, he condemned Shekau's actions, including the abandonment of certain detainees during negotiations with the Nigerian government.

¹⁵ Technically, al-Barnawi is not

Operational shifts and tactical acumen: understanding and exploiting military strategy

In January 2025, ISIS released an editorial focused on ISWAP's strategic response to the Nigerian military's "super camp" strategy in the northeast. The piece highlights ISWAP's detailed understanding of this strategy, which consolidates troops in fortified bases to reduce casualties and limit insurgent movement. ISWAP critiqued the approach as predictable and exploitable, claiming it enabled the group to conduct surprise raids, utilise drones, and exploit vulnerabilities in base structures. The editorial cited successful attacks in Sabon Gari, Kareto, and Kukawa as evidence of ISWAP's tactical adaptability through real-time intelligence and mobility.

The publication conveyed several key messages: ISWAP's capacity for operational learning, the limitations of the super camp strategy, especially its inability to secure peripheral areas, and the group's ability to integrate military strategy with ideological narratives. By portraying battlefield gains as divinely ordained, ISWAP enhances its propaganda, boosts fighter morale, and attracts recruits. Overall, the editorial presents ISWAP as a strategically proactive force capable of doctrinal adaptation and long-term planning.

Last year, ISWAP arguably became the first non-state actor in West Africa to deploy weaponised drones for direct attacks, marking a major shift in the region's insurgent tactics. This came after a couple of years of trials and fine-tuning¹⁶. Boko Haram, notably under Shekau, had access to drones about a decade earlier, but their use had primarily been limited to surveillance. With this new capability, ISWAP's adoption of combat drones significantly enhances its operational reach, giving it more options while making it difficult for the military to adequately respond to this new threat¹⁷.

Airstrikes conducted by the Nigerian military have proven effective in degrading key elements of ISWAP's infrastructure, including workshops, vehicles, and shelters. These operations have also resulted in the elimination of several senior commanders. Notably, Abu Jabir, then Wali of Wilayah Buhaira, was reportedly killed in early 2023 when a Nigerian Air Force fighter jet targeted Buhaira.

Despite its operational resilience, ISWAP has yet to develop a comprehensive countermeasure to neutralise the threat

posed by aerial bombardments. Interviewees noted that the group remains particularly fearful of fighter jets and attack helicopters. In response, it has adopted rudimentary mitigation measures, including instructing fighters to dig shallow bunkers in front of their dwellings. These bunkers, while not deep or structurally sophisticated, are designed to provide immediate shelter for a fighter and his family during air raids.

Demonstrating its capacity for adaptation, ISWAP has also institutionalised post-strike procedures. After air raids, fighters are deployed to locate unexploded ordnance (UXO) left behind by the military aircraft. These devices are subsequently repurposed for use in the group's IEDs.

Knowledge transfer and external support from ISIS

As a key affiliate of the Islamic State, and arguably its largest and most operationally successful, ISWAP enjoys substantial support from the global jihadist organisation. The relationship between ISIS and ISWAP is characterised by mutual benefit, strategic trust, and shared ideological commitment. Both entities depend on each other for distinct but interrelated reasons.

Following the military defeat of ISIS in 2019 and the fall of its last territorial stronghold in Baghuz¹⁸, Syria, the group has increasingly relied on its network of affiliates to project relevance and sustain its global brand. In this context, Africa – particularly the Sahel, West and Central Africa – has emerged as a critical arena for ISIS operations. These regions offer a conducive environment for the growth and entrenchment of violent extremism, driven by factors such as high youth unemployment, endemic corruption, political instability, weak or absent state authority in peripheral areas, and the proliferation of organised crime.

Since its break from the Shekau-led JAS, ISWAP has played a pivotal role in maintaining ISIS's global stature as the world's deadliest terrorist organisation¹⁹. In return, ISWAP has received significant support from ISIS in the form of financial assistance, logistical resources, and strategic guidance. However, the most impactful contribution has arguably been in the military domain. This support has been instrumental in ISWAP's ability to launch increasingly

¹⁶ See <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/iswaps-use-of-tech-could-prolong-lake-chad-basin-violence>

¹⁷ See <https://www.dw.com/en/iswap-extremists-launching-attack-drones-in-nigeria/a-72241455>

¹⁸ See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47678157>

¹⁹ See <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/#/>

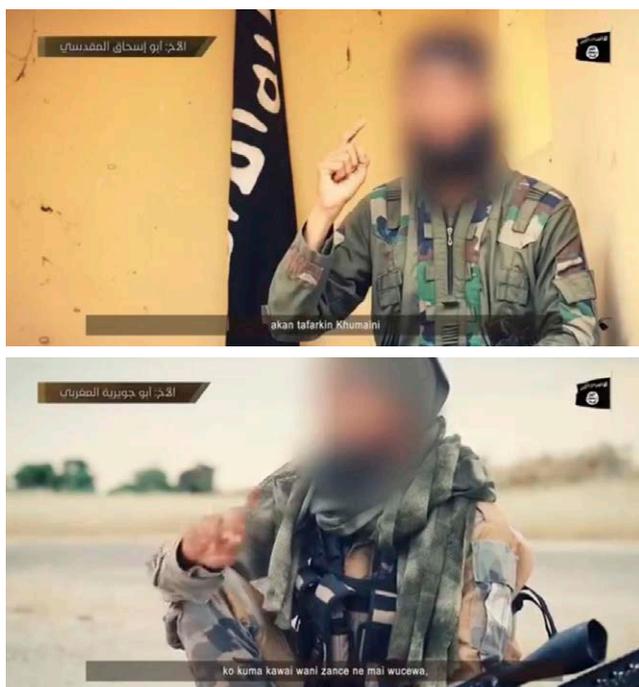


Photo: Screenshot from ISIS propaganda video

ISIS foreign fighters in Nigeria, one of which participated in the attack on Damboa military base on 23 May 2025.

sophisticated and sustained offensives across the Lake Chad Basin, underscoring the depth and effectiveness of the ISIS-ISWAP partnership.

Former combatants said there are at least seven ISIS instructors currently in the Lake Chad Basin since 2024, most of whom are from North Africa, offering different support to ISWAP. In a 2024 ISWAP propaganda video of young boys undergoing combat training, the physical appearance of a couple of the instructors suggests that they were not from the LCB. Their names – Abu Ishaq Al-Maqdisi and Abu Juwayriya Al-Maghribi – also suggest this.

In the video, the children are shown undergoing sniper training, practising tactical positioning, learning weapon handling, shooting practice, and being subjected to ideological indoctrination²⁰. Part of the training also involved camouflage and stealth tactics, enabling trainees to position themselves undetected by mimicking the surrounding environment. Outside the cameras, according to sources, the instructors conduct training sessions for senior fighters in IED fabrication, the rigging of vehicles to detonate upon activation, and drone operation.

Over the years, one of the key tactical competencies that ISIS has transferred to ISWAP fighters is the conduct of coordinated assaults on security forces. Previously,

such attacks were often launched at any time of day and involved large numbers of fighters. These assaults were typically preceded by loud chanting of the takbir ("Allahu Akbar") and indiscriminate gunfire from a distance – tactics that frequently compromised the element of surprise. As a result, security forces were often alerted in advance and able to mount defensive responses, leading to significant casualties among ISWAP fighters.

In response to these setbacks, ISWAP has since adapted its battlefield approach. The group now favours more sophisticated operations, typically carried out at night by smaller, elite units. These teams operate with greater stealth and tactical precision, often supported by reinforcement units positioned nearby to provide backup if needed. This shift reflects a broader trend toward operational discipline and battlefield innovation within ISWAP's ranks.

According to accounts from former fighters, the operational strategies employed by ISWAP in the field are often modelled after training doctrines established by the ISIS instructors, with fighters usually keen to try the tactics on the battlefield. Wilayah Farouk, responsible for some of the recent worrisome attacks against several military bases, typifies how effective the strategies have been. The Wilayah is tasked with overseeing attacks in southern Borno, northern Adamawa, and Yobe States. Notably, it has

20 See <https://www.memri.org/jtm/islamic-state-west-africa-iswap-releases-video-showing-cubs-executing-captives-vowing-carry>



Photo: Screenshot from ISIS propaganda video

Above: A ISWAP suicide bomber posing for a picture before his mission. **Right:** The detonation switch in a SBVIED vehicle.

been linked to assaults on military positions in Buni Gari, Buni Yadi, Goniri, Wajiroko, and Sabon Gari, among others. These operations were reportedly led by a midlevel field commander identified as Sa’ad²¹, a Qaid.

Fighters designated for such operations are typically organised into three separate units, each comprising approximately 60 combatants²². Before any planned assault, all three units are mobilised and positioned. However, only one unit is deployed to initiate the attack, while the remaining two are stationed at locations within a 15-minute response radius. Commanders are trained to assess within the first 15 minutes of engagement whether reinforcements are required. If so, one of the two standby units is called in. Should the situation escalate further, the third unit may also be deployed to the battlefield.

Evidence indicates that foreign fighters, particularly from Arab countries, are now operating within ISWAP’s combat units. One such individual appeared in a propaganda video as part of Wilayah Farouk’s team that attacked a strategic Nigerian military brigade in Damboa, Borno State, in May²³. Military sources noted that ISWAP might have captured the brigade, considered one of the most critical formations in the northeast, had it not been for the timely intervention of a fighter jet. The individual, identified on ISIS-linked platforms as an Arab fighter, was prominently featured in

propaganda materials, reflecting the symbolic importance the group places on foreign reinforcement. Sources in northeast Nigeria confirmed that this fighter is one of seven ISIS instructors reportedly deployed to support ISWAP operations in 2024. Their integration into frontline combat units, coupled with their propaganda visibility, suggests a deliberate strategy to embed foreign operatives in active operations, potentially marking the beginning of a broader influx into the region.

To sustain morale and ensure commitment among combatants, ISWAP reportedly distributes the spoils of war equally among all three units involved in the operation, regardless of whether the standby groups actively participated in combat. Once a fighter has been mobilised from base as part of an attack force, he becomes entitled to a share of the battlefield gains.

ISWAP has also increasingly integrated suicide bombings into both its offensive and defensive military strategies, with particular emphasis on the use of Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (SVBIEDs). Operationally, SVBIEDs are deployed to penetrate fortified military perimeters, inflict mass casualties, and cause significant structural damage. Tactically, they are also used as a deterrent, serving to obstruct or delay military advances into ISWAP-controlled areas.

21 This Sa’ad is different from ISWAP’s former Amir al-Jaish.

22 Abbas Umar, also known as Dibabu, the treasurer and armourer for Wilayah Farouk, determines which fighters go into which group.

23 See <https://gga.org/from-the-levant-to-lake-chad-isis-fighters-fuel-iswap-resurgence/>

The deployment of SVBIEDs is typically reserved for high-impact operations, particularly when the group anticipates strong resistance or the possibility of being overpowered. For instance, in March 2025, ISWAP employed this tactic during an assault on a Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) outpost manned by Cameroonian troops in the border town of Wulgo in Borno state, resulting in the deaths of 15 soldiers.

A similar incident occurred in May 2024, when Chadian forces under the MNJTF were compelled to withdraw during an attempted incursion into key ISWAP-held islands. In that operation, Abba Yusuf, best known by his aliases Abu Rumaisa or Abu Hydar – the group's longest-serving head of media and younger brother of al-Barnawi – drove an SVBIED directly into the advancing troops. During the same period as Operation Lake Sanity II by the MNJTF, sources reported that ISWAP strategically planted IEDs along key access routes, specifically from Krenowa to Marte, and from Chikun Guduwa to Wulgo. This defensive tactic was aimed at impeding military advancement and preventing troops from penetrating ISWAP-controlled territories.

Beyond SVBIEDs, ISWAP also employs IEDs along anticipated military routes to target routine patrols and obstruct the movement of reinforcements during ongoing attacks. This layered use of explosive tactics reflects the group's adaptive battlefield strategy and its increasing operational sophistication.

Security gaps and military challenges

During different conversations with security officials, both within the military and intelligence agencies, it was commonly stated that Boko Haram has been greatly underestimated by security forces over the last few years. This underestimation came from the fallout and aftermath of Shekau's death, which plunged both factions into an intense battle for supremacy from 2022 to 2024²⁴. Most of the officials spoken to agreed that the mistake made was that the Nigerian military thought and expected that the inter-group fighting would result in either the decimation of both groups or that whichever faction emerged victorious would be so weakened that it would pose little or no threat to the State. This perhaps explains why there was no sustained military pressure against the groups during this period, with operations only sporadic, lasting only days or a few weeks.

While the fighting between the rivals was both lengthy and brutal²⁵, it was punctuated by occasional ceasefires and dialogue. Since late 2024, both sides have stopped fighting, with sources claiming both are looking to put a lasting end to the fighting. This pause has given them more time to focus on a common enemy, the State. Similarly, the mass exits that characterised the post-Shekau era have also slowed, meaning both groups are losing fewer fighters than before.

The withdrawal of Niger from the MNJTF has also significantly undermined the collective security framework in the Lake Chad Basin. This exit has weakened joint military operations, reduced intelligence sharing, and created security vacuums. As a result, ISWAP and JAS have regained mobility, reactivated logistics routes, and intensified cross-border operations with minimal resistance.

Moreover, the political fallout from such withdrawals has fractured regional trust and coordination, further disrupting counterinsurgency efforts. ISWAP exploits these setbacks both tactically and ideologically, using them to bolster recruitment, morale, and propaganda narratives that portray state forces as retreating and vulnerable²⁶.

Another persistent challenge in Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign is the limited evolution in the state's understanding of Boko Haram and the conflict dynamics, despite over a decade of sustained conflict. At the onset of the insurgency, a widely accepted justification for the military's underperformance was its lack of experience with asymmetric warfare. However, sixteen years later, this rationale appears insufficient. The Nigerian military still demonstrates an inadequate grasp of Boko Haram's internal dynamics, ideological shifts, recruitment strategies, and operational evolution. This stagnation in strategic learning undermines the ability to take the initiative, resulting in a predominantly reactionary posture.

Understanding one's adversary is a fundamental principle of modern warfare, particularly in counterinsurgency. Yet, many military operations continue to be reactive, often mirroring the pace of insurgent attacks. Whenever Boko Haram reduces its operations, military campaigns similarly slow down, suggesting a dependency on insurgent activity to dictate tempo. This approach cedes strategic initiative to the adversary.

²⁴ Though the infighting started in 2021 following the death of Shekau, it intensified from 2022.

²⁵ See <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/b196-jas-vs-iswap-war-boko-haram-splinters>

²⁶ In the January editorial, ISIS mocks the problem confronting the regional alliance.

ISWAP, on the other hand, has demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of military strategy, as illustrated in ISIS propaganda. The group consistently adapts its operational approach in response to evolving government tactics. For example, its preference for conducting attacks at night appears to be a deliberate strategy aimed at limiting the effectiveness of military reinforcements and reducing the likelihood of immediate counterattacks. This tactical flexibility underscores ISWAP's ability to study and exploit the structural and operational weaknesses of state forces, thereby maintaining a strategic advantage in the theatre of conflict.

Troops on the frontline continue to complain of low morale, which they claim remains a critical issue that affects their willingness to fight. The low morale is exacerbated by unmet welfare expectations, even with the recent increment in the feeding allowance²⁷. Soldiers claim that the increment has not translated into improved meal quality across the board, blaming this on unit commanders²⁸.

Many deployed soldiers lack experience, having been posted to the Northeast within months of recruitment due to troop rotation policies and the overstretching of personnel. This lack of experience limits operational effectiveness, especially in confronting a seasoned insurgency.

Closely linked to the welfare issue are logistical shortcomings, which further weaken the military's posture. Key assets, including MRAPs, are often grounded by minor issues such as dead batteries or a lack of engine oil, reflecting poor maintenance and supply chain inefficiencies. This partly explains why ISWAP fighters often set military vehicles ablaze during attacks, as many are immobile due to mechanical faults or lack of maintenance.

Socioeconomic and political factors

Socioeconomic grievances such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education continue to contribute to ISWAP's resurgence by creating fertile ground for recruitment²⁹. In marginalised and underserved communities of northeast Nigeria, ISWAP has continued to exploit these vulnerabilities by offering financial incentives,

boosting livelihoods, and a sense of purpose, particularly to unemployed youth and displaced persons, as a way of solidifying itself as the best alternative government. This governance structure continues to attract civilians to areas within the group's control.

In 2021, the Borno State government came up with the Borno Model, an ambitious and locally-driven framework for countering violent extremism in the state. The model reflects a shift from purely military solutions to more community-centred, restorative, and preventive strategies. Two important components of the model are the defection of Boko Haram fighters and the relocation of displaced persons back to their communities.

This political decision to return displaced persons to their communities, many of which remain insecure³⁰, has also played a part in the surge in attacks.

Returnees are exposed to renewed attacks, notably from JAS, due to inadequate security guarantees, stretched military presence, and slow response times, which JAS exploits to reassert control in some areas. These returns, some of which are involuntary³¹, see many resettled persons returning to Maiduguri or local government headquarters and integrating themselves into host communities because of insecurity in the communities where they have been relocated. Since the relocation started, communities, particularly those in Bama, Dikwa, Konduga, and Mafa have faced near daily predation from JAS fighters, who abduct, rob and harass villagers both on highways, in their homes or farms³². For civilians in northern Borno communities, notably Mobbar, Kukawa and Abadam, where hundreds of rural communities are within ISWAP's areas of influence, they are caught up in the middle of the ISWAP-JAS fight for territorial control. JAS has increasingly encroached on ISWAP territories around Lake Chad, and a fallout of this is that civilians in these areas are punished for remitting taxes to ISWAP instead of to JAS.

Civilians also fear reprisals from the military, particularly because ISWAP typically refrains from targeting them during attacks on military installations. This pattern has led to concerns that the military may interpret the absence

27 See <https://businessday.ng/news/article/army-increases-troops-daily-feeding-allowance-from-n1500-to-n3000/>

28 The soldiers in some units, there are noticeable changes in the meal quality, but other units have remained unchanged. They believe the military high command's failure to enforce oversight fosters suspicions of collusion and misappropriation.

29 See <https://www.undp.org/publications/journey-extremism-africa-pathways-recruitment-and-disengagement>

30 See <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/b184-rethinking-resettlement-and-return-nigerias-north-east>

31 The displaced people are incentivised with a promise of cash and food items if they agree to be repatriated. Usually, they receive half of the money and items before departure and receive the other half when they get to their communities. Many times, after receiving the other half, the IDPs return to Maiduguri.

32 Many of these attacks are not reported because they don't result in fatalities, as JAS uses them primarily to shore up its resources. Also, the state government has been able to maintain a grip on media coverage of the crisis in the state, with many such attacks going unreported.



Photo: Screenshot from ISIS propaganda video

ISWAP child soldiers undergoing indoctrination.

of civilian casualties as evidence of local collaboration, such as the provision of intelligence to ISWAP. For example, following the May attack on Marte³³, many civilians fled to Dikwa, citing fears that if ISWAP continued to target the town and spare civilians, the military would soon begin questioning why they had been spared and potentially accuse them of complicity with the group³⁴. It took the intervention of Governor Zulum, who visited Dikwa, to convince them to return to Marte.

Competition among ISIS affiliates, propaganda and massive recruitment

Toward the end of 2024, data from ISIS's official media channels, including the weekly al-Naba newsletter and other affiliated platforms, indicated that ISWAP had been outperformed in operational tempo by other regional ISIS franchises, particularly the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) and Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP). These affiliates were credited with an increase in attacks, territorial incursions, and propaganda outputs³⁵.

For ISWAP, a group that has historically been regarded as one of the most formidable and stable ISIS provinces, such a decline in operational prominence may have triggered an internal recalibration aimed at reasserting its

strategic relevance. This is especially plausible given the symbolic and operational importance of ISWAP within the broader ISIS architecture, not least because of the historic leadership role of al-Barnawi. As such, ISWAP may have been motivated by both internal pressure and external competition to re-establish its stature.

Additionally, in keeping with ISIS's broader strategic vision, ISWAP likely intensified its efforts in both propaganda dissemination and recruitment. ISIS central has consistently emphasised media warfare as a core element of its global strategy, and ISWAP appears to have mirrored this approach. A spike in media content, ranging from battlefield footage and martyrdom narratives to ideological justifications and governance-related messaging³⁶, suggests a renewed effort to project strength, attract recruits, and reaffirm its stature as a leading franchise.

ISWAP's recruitment drive, particularly in rural communities and targeting young boys³⁷, has reportedly drawn on a combination of material inducements, ideological indoctrination, and coercion. By exploiting local grievances and state security gaps, the group has been able to regenerate its ranks and possibly compensate for leadership losses or prior operational setbacks.

33 The 11 May attack on the 50 Task Force Battalion resulted in the death of four soldiers and the seizure of weapons and military equipment, including more than 40 motorcycles.

34 Allegations of civilian collaboration with Boko Haram have been a persistent feature of the conflict since its onset. While there have been instances where individuals suspected of supporting the group have been arrested, the Nigerian military has also faced criticism for indiscriminately targeting entire communities accused of sympathizing with or aiding the insurgents.

35 Al-Naba regularly publishes weekly infographics highlighting the operational activities and achievements of various ISIS affiliates, often praising individual fighters – particularly those involved in suicide operations. This media strategy may be deliberately designed to motivate underperforming provinces to intensify their efforts and align more closely with the group's broader objectives.

36 See <https://humanglemedia.com/soft-jihad-how-terrorists-use-propaganda-to-attract-local-support/>

37 See <https://humanglemedia.com/terrorism-for-children-the-corrosive-doctrine-jihadists-pass-to-next-generation/>

Implications for regional stability

The resurgence of Boko Haram, particularly ISWAP, poses serious risks to both national and regional stability. The renewed wave of attacks has resulted in a sharp rise in civilian casualties. Many of the affected areas are inaccessible due to the threat of violence, which hampers aid delivery and further entrenches humanitarian need.

Regionally, there is heightened concern over the cross-border spread of insurgent operations, particularly into Niger and Cameroon. The withdrawal of Niger from the MNJTF has created critical security vacuums, diminishing joint military effectiveness and enabling ISWAP and JAS to revive logistics routes and cross-border mobility. This erosion of regional cooperation risks turning the conflict into prolonged transnational threats that extend beyond the LCB.

ISIS has leveraged these developments to reinforce its ideological narrative and global relevance, portraying African affiliates like ISWAP as resilient and expanding. This perception, whether accurate or exaggerated, contributes to ISWAP's recruitment momentum and fosters a perception of state retreat across multiple fronts, including military, governance, and humanitarian response.

Policy recommendations

Strengthening military and intelligence capabilities

- Increase targeted investments in troop training, equipment, and maintenance to improve readiness and resilience against insurgent offensives.
- Institutionalise adaptive learning frameworks within the military through enhanced human intelligence networks, partnerships with research institutions, and deployment of conflict analysts focused on insurgent doctrine, strategy, and local grievances.
- To preserve long-term credibility, authorities should avoid proclaiming victory after every minor or short-term success and instead acknowledge that ISWAP is engaged in a sustained campaign, one that involves strategic investment and capacity building. Rather than relying on reactive messaging, the focus should be on consistently staying ahead of the group by adapting and evolving counterinsurgency strategies to keep ISWAP on the defensive.
- Improve logistical support systems and morale-boosting measures to counteract operational fatigue and prevent security lapses.

Enhancing regional cooperation

- Revitalise the MNJTF and other regional security architectures to improve intelligence sharing, cross-border patrols, and coordinated counterinsurgency operations.
- Engage diplomatically to encourage Niger and other states to recommit to collective security frameworks essential for addressing the transnational nature of Boko Haram's operations.

Addressing root causes

- Develop and implement long-term socioeconomic programmes targeting unemployment, education, infrastructure, and livelihoods in vulnerable communities.
- Focus on youth empowerment through vocational training, microfinance initiatives, and community-based development programmes to reduce the appeal of insurgent recruitment.

Community engagement and rehabilitation

- Expand community-based deradicalisation and reintegration programmes, learning from the successes and limitations of initiatives like the Borno Model and Operation Safe Corridor.
- Enhance local governance and civic trust by involving traditional, religious, and youth leaders in early warning systems, conflict resolution, and public sensitisation campaigns.
- Ensure that the return and resettlement of displaced persons are voluntary, adequately supported, and based on comprehensive security assessments.

Conclusion

Evidence from field data, interviews, and operational trends suggests that Boko Haram, particularly ISWAP, is undergoing a resurgence marked by increased attacks, territorial ambitions, and tactical innovation. This resurgence is fuelled by a combination of external support from ISIS, strategic reorganisation, socioeconomic grievances, and lapses in state security responses.

While the group remains vulnerable to sustained military pressure and internal challenges, the current response is fragmented and reactive. A comprehensive, long-term approach that integrates military, political, and developmental interventions is essential to reverse the trend and prevent the group from further entrenching itself across the Lake Chad Basin and even beyond.



Photo: Screenshot from ISIS propaganda video

For more information on this research report, contact our Good Governance Africa advisory services team.

Contact us

Tel: +234 (01) 280 9100

Email: malik@gga.org

Web: www.gga.org

