

RESEARCH  
REPORT

**ABOVE:** A community guard stands watch in Baidi, Nigeria in January 2026. Days before, Lakurawa attacked this village and killed several people.

GOOD GOVERNANCE AFRICA

# Beyond Lakurawa: Mapping the emergence and expansion of the Islamic State Sahel Province in Northwest Nigeria

By Malik Samuel

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## Executive Summary

The emergence of the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) in Northwest Nigeria marks a significant escalation in the country's evolving security landscape. While public discourse has frequently conflated ISSP with Lakurawa, a locally rooted armed group operating in the region since at least 2017, this report demonstrates that the two organisations are distinct, independent, and actively hostile toward one another.

Based on field research conducted across 13 villages in seven local government areas spanning Sokoto and Kebbi states, this study documents ISSP's growing organisational presence through interviews with community leaders and residents, analysis of 16 correspondence letters issued by the group, and examination of the operational dynamics between ISSP and Lakurawa. The evidence shows that ISSP has been establishing contact with communities by at least December 2025, intensifying its activities in early 2026, and has deliberately sought to differentiate itself from Lakurawa through ideological outreach, conciliatory messaging, and promises of protection, contrasting sharply with Lakurawa's pattern of coercion, extraction, and punitive enforcement.

The report further reveals that ISSP's arrival introduces into Nigeria the intense jihadist rivalry that has defined the contemporary Sahel, particularly between ISSP and JNIM, with reported confrontations already occurring within Nigerian territory. This fragmentation complicates threat assessment and attribution, as illustrated by ISSP's claim of responsibility for the Giro Masa attack, an operation that field sources confirm was carried out by Lakurawa.

The findings carry significant implications for counterterrorism strategy. Not properly differentiating armed groups in the Northwest risks developing ineffective responses. Military operations, while necessary, cannot by themselves address the governance deficits, socioeconomic exclusion, and weak state presence that make communities vulnerable to extremist influence. The report concludes that Northwest Nigeria is becoming part of a wider Sahelian conflict system in which alliances, rivalries, and recruitment networks increasingly transcend national borders. An effective response will require a strategy that is adaptive, integrated, and regional in scope, one that combines sustained military pressure with stronger local governance, community engagement, and pragmatic regional cooperation.

## Methodology

This report is based on field research conducted by Good Governance Africa (GGA) in Sokoto and Kebbi states, Northwest Nigeria, over a period of three weeks. The research was designed to assess ISSP's claims of presence in the region, document its activities, and evaluate any evidence of a relationship between ISSP and Lakurawa.

The study tracked and documented ISSP's presence and operations across at least 44 villages in seven local government areas: Binji, Goronyo, Illela, Rabah, Silame, and Tangaza in Sokoto State, and Bagudo in Kebbi State. The research employed a mixed-method approach combining physical and remote interviews with community leaders

and residents in 15 affected communities that had direct contact and interactions with ISSP. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture detailed accounts of community engagements, group identification practices, and operational dynamics. The choice of selecting 15 communities out of 44 was informed by both time and access constraints.

The research team obtained and analysed 16 correspondence letters issued by ISSP to nine communities, 14 from Sokoto State and 2 from Kebbi State. Nine of the letters were written in Hausa and seven in Arabic. The letters were dated and cross-referenced with community testimonies to establish a chronological framework for ISSP's presence and activities.

The study compared ISSP's letters, messaging, and engagement practices with those of Lakurawa to identify distinctions in presentation, tone, content, and community interactions.

To protect interviewees and avoid exposing communities to potential reprisals, all participants were assured of anonymity. The names of specific communities visited during the research have been withheld. Participants were informed that neither their identities nor the names of their communities would be disclosed in any publication. Community leaders provided letters only after receiving these assurances.

## Methodological limitations

The study acknowledges the challenges inherent in researching armed groups in volatile environments, including the potential for interviewee recall bias, the inability to independently verify all claims made by community members, and the constraints imposed by community reluctance to share more letters obtained from ISSP due to government warnings against discussing the group's presence.

## Introduction

The publication of the 28 May edition of *Al-Naba*, the Islamic State's weekly newspaper, may mark a significant turning point in Nigeria's evolving security landscape. In that issue, the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) claimed responsibility for two attacks against Nigerian soldiers in Sokoto and Kebbi states and asserted that, although this was its first public claim in Northwest Nigeria, it had previously conducted other operations in the region without announcing them for "security reasons".

The claims immediately reignited a longstanding debate over the identity of armed groups operating in the Northwest. Since Lakurawa emerged in northwestern Nigeria several years ago, analysts and officials have frequently linked the group to ISSP, often treating the two as interchangeable. Yet the available evidence has remained scant.

This report argues that ISSP has established an independent presence in Northwest Nigeria and is actively distinguishing itself from Lakurawa. Rather than confirming existing assumptions, the evidence shows the emergence of a more complex jihadist landscape with significant implications for conflict dynamics, counterterrorism strategy, and regional security.

## The Giro Masa claim and why it matters

In the 28 May issue of *Al-Naba*, the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) claimed responsibility for two attacks in northwest Nigeria. The first was the killing of seven Nigerian soldiers at Runji Dan Doto village in Illela Local Government Area of Sokoto State on 15 May 2026. The second was an attack on 24 March 2026 at Giro Masa village in Shanga Local Government Area of Kebbi State, where at least 11 soldiers lost their lives<sup>1</sup>.

While ISSP later released photographs of the Runji Dan Doto operation, including images of the deceased soldiers and weapons allegedly seized, it waited until 11 June before releasing a couple of images from the Giro Masa incident. However, GGA's documentation of the incident establishes that the attack was actually carried out by Lakurawa, not ISSP. That operation resulted in gunshot wounds to

<sup>1</sup> Daily Trust (2026), 11 soldiers, police officer killed in Kebbi ambush: <https://dailytrust.com/11-soldiers-police-officer-killed-in-kebbi-ambush/>

Lakurawa's northwest commander, Muhammad Abubakar al-Karawi, popularly known as Dando Sibü, who died one week later after failing to obtain medical treatment.

A closer examination of the images ISSP released for the Giro Masa attack raises further questions. The Islamic State, particularly in Africa, has developed a reputation for accompanying its claims with detailed pictorial evidence, typically showing bodies of security forces killed and or equipment seized. A major incident like Giro Masa, which resulted in the death of more than 10 soldiers, would ordinarily be expected to yield more images than ISSP displayed. This becomes even more apparent when compared with the Runji Dan Doto claim, where seven soldiers were killed and IS published photographs of all seven bodies along with a detailed image of captured weapons. In the Giro Masa claim, however, IS released only two pictures of bodies supposedly from the attack.

Sources familiar with Lakurawa operations insisted that the Giro Masa attack was indeed a Lakurawa operation, though they could not explain how the images from the attack ended up with ISSP.

The question then arises: How did ISSP obtain images from an attack it did not carry out? A plausible explanation lies in the shared recruitment pool available to both ISSP and Lakurawa in the Sahel. In a context marked by exits and defections, it is possible that former members of one group are recruited by another. Since both Lakurawa and ISSP draw fighters from the Sahel, some of these combatants, particularly within the rank-and-file, may maintain contacts with their former associates even after joining rival groups. This phenomenon has been observed between ISWAP and JAS in the Lake Chad Basin. When juxtaposed with the detailed visual documentation provided for Runji, ISSP's sparse Giro Masa claim points to the strong possibility that the group was not the primary source of those images.

The Islamic State may have cultivated a reputation for only claiming attacks it has actually perpetrated. Yet there have been a few notable instances where it has claimed responsibility without providing verifiable proof, like



**Figure 1:** Dando Sibü, the deceased Lakurawa leader in northwest Nigeria, died from gunshot wounds sustained in the Giro Masa attack.

the 2017 Las Vegas shooting<sup>2</sup> and the 2017 Resorts World Manila casino attack.<sup>3</sup> In both attacks, authorities refuted IS claims of responsibility.

### Reassessing the 'relationship' between ISSP and Lakurawa

ISSP's claim of expansion into Northwest Nigeria also exposes inconsistencies in the prevailing narrative that Lakurawa operates as an Islamic State affiliate.

If Lakurawa and ISSP were effectively the same organisation, it would be difficult to explain why IS

2 NBC News (2017), Las Vegas shooting: ISIS claim of responsibility is sign of desperation: <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/las-vegas-shooting/las-vegas-shooting-isis-claim-responsibility-sign-desperation-say-experts-n807076>

3 Aljazeera (2017), Manila resorts world attack: what we know: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/6/4/manila-resorts-world-attack-what-we-know>

remained silent on numerous Lakurawa operations in Northwest Nigeria over several years before suddenly announcing an expansion into the region in 2026.

Some known Lakurawa attacks that a jihadi group like IS would typically use for propaganda, if it was responsible for them, include the attack on a police station in Illo<sup>4</sup>, Kebbi state, to free detained members; abduction of the deputy speaker<sup>5</sup> of the Kebbi state house of assembly; and the killing of 13 vigilantes in Mera village, Augie local government area of Kebbi state.

Equally puzzling is ISSP's own assertion that its recent claims represent a new expansion into the region, despite Lakurawa having operated there openly in since 2017. This becomes even more curious when considered alongside the fact that in 2019, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the killing of soldiers in Sokoto State<sup>6</sup> by ISWAP fighters operating from Niger Republic. At that time, ISSP was known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara<sup>7</sup> and operated under ISWAP's command. As an independent entity, ISSP had never claimed any attack in Northwest Nigeria prior to its latest announcement.

Another unanswered question concerns the United States strike in Sokoto on 25 December 2025, which hit a Lakurawa camp. If ISSP was the intended target of that operation, as claimed by President Donald Trump – and as analysts and observers claimed the strike was unsuccessful – IS would have had a strong propaganda incentive to publicise any failed attempt against it while also possibly mocking the US, given that it referenced the ongoing US-Nigeria military cooperation in the Northeast in its 28 May publication.

These inconsistencies suggest that assumptions about the two organisations require closer scrutiny and should be tested against field evidence rather than inference. In previous research<sup>8</sup>, GGA shows that the two groups are not connected.

## Field evidence of ISSP's presence in Northwest Nigeria

To assess ISSP's claims and better understand the group's activities in Northwest Nigeria, GGA tracked and documented its presence and activities across at least 44 villages in seven local government areas spanning Sokoto and Kebbi states. These included Binji, Goronyo, Illela, Rabah, Silame and Tangaza local government areas in Sokoto State, as well as Bagudo local government area in Kebbi State.

Over the course of three weeks, GGA conducted physical and remote interviews with community leaders and residents in 15 affected communities who had direct contact and interactions with ISSP in the two states.

The most striking finding was the consistency with which the group identified itself to communities. Across all communities visited, interviewees said the men that came to their communities introduced themselves as members of the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP). The name was reportedly communicated mostly in Arabic, Hausa and, in some instances, English. Residents and community leaders interviewed were familiar with the group's identity, referring to it by the acronym 'ISSP', suggesting how much emphasis the group placed on getting the people familiar with its identity.

Based on the interviews, the group's engagement with communities typically begins before its physical arrival. According to community leaders, ISSP first established contact with them through messengers that informed them about the group's intended visit as a way of preventing panic. In some cases, letters were subsequently delivered ahead of the visit. Where local leaders had access to smartphones, the letters were sent electronically through intermediaries for printing before the group's arrival. In most cases, though, couriers physically delivered the letters.

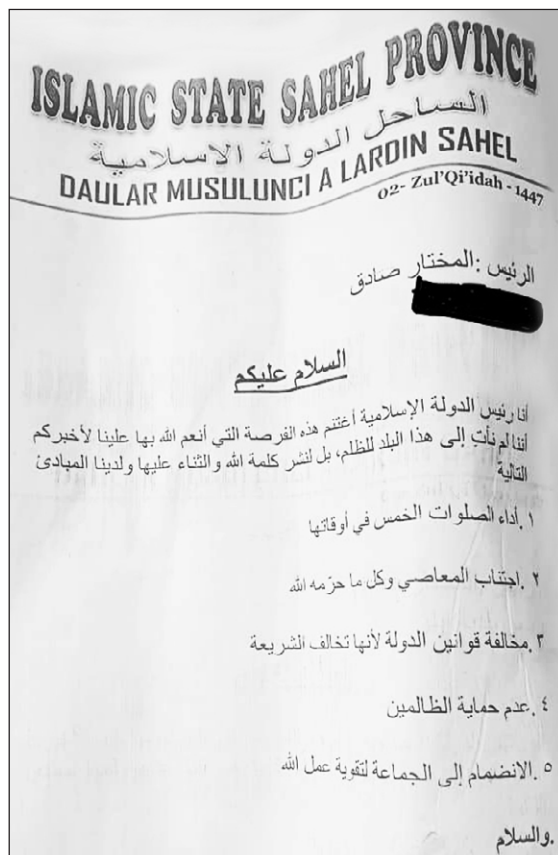
4 Business Day (2026), Suspected Lakurawa members set Kebbi police station on fire, seize ammunition: <https://businessday.ng/news/article/suspected-lakurawa-members-set-kebbi-police-station-on-fire-seize-ammunition/>

5 Premium Times (2025), Kidnapped Kebbi deputy speaker freed after one week – official: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/834026-kidnapped-kebbi-deputy-speaker-freed-after-one-week-official.html>

6 International Crisis Group (2019), Crisis Watch: October 2019: [https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location%5B%5D=28&crisis\\_state=&created=custom&from\\_month=9&from\\_year=2019&to\\_month=11&to\\_year=2019](https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location%5B%5D=28&crisis_state=&created=custom&from_month=9&from_year=2019&to_month=11&to_year=2019)

7 Jamestown (2026), JNIM Escalates Sahelian Offensives Amid Fratricidal War with ISSP: <https://jamestown.org/jnim-escalates-sahelian-offensives-amid-fratricidal-war-with-issp/>

8 Good Governance Africa (2026), Lakurawa: From transnational jihadist insertion in Northeast Nigeria to criminal-predatory governance in Northwest Nigeria: <https://digitalmallblobstorage.blob.core.windows.net/wp-content/2026/05/Lakurawa-Research-Report-N.pdf>



### ISSP letter 02- Zul'Qi'idah 1447 – Arabic

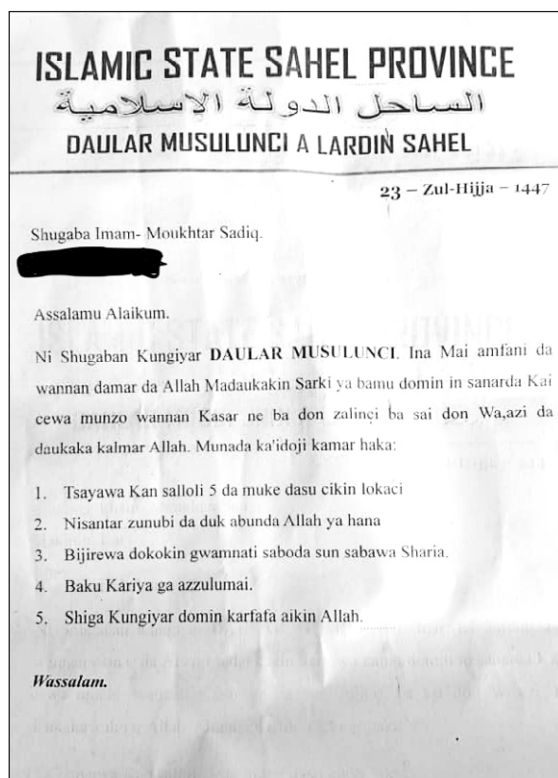
Islamic State Sahel Province (in English)  
 Islamic State Sahel (Arabic)  
 Islamic State in the Sahel Province (Hausa)  
 19 April 2026  
 Leader: Al-Mukhtar Sadiq

Peace be upon you.  
 I, the head of the Islamic State, take this opportunity that God has bestowed upon us to inform you that we have come to this land not for oppression, but rather to spread and proclaim the word of Allah.

We have the following principles:

1. To perform the five daily prayers at their prescribed times.
2. To avoid sins and everything that Allah has forbidden.
3. Not to violate the state's laws because they contradict the Sharia.
4. Not to protect oppressors.
5. To join the group in order to strengthen the work of Allah.

Peace.



### ISSP letter 23 Zul-Hijja 1447 – Hausa

Islamic State Sahel (in English)  
 Islamic State Sahel (in Arabic)  
 Islamic State in the Sahel Province (in Hausa)  
 9 June 2026  
 Leader: Imam Moukhtar Sadiq

Peace be upon you.  
 I am the leader of the Islamic State organisation. I am using this opportunity that Almighty Allah has given us to inform you that we have come to this land not for oppression, but rather for preaching and elevating the word of Allah. We have the following principles:

1. Observance of the five daily prayers at their prescribed times.
2. Abstention from sin and all that Allah has forbidden.
3. Rejection of government laws because they contradict Sharia.
4. Do not provide protection to oppressors.
5. Join the organisation to strengthen the cause of Allah.

Peace.

Figure 2: ISSP engagement letters issued to communities in Sokoto and Kebbi states.

GGA obtained 16 of these letters from nine communities – 14 in Sokoto State and two in Kebbi State. Nine of the letters were written in Hausa, while seven were in Arabic. Community leaders initially declined to share the letters, explaining that government authorities had warned them against discussing the group’s presence and activities or making the correspondence public. They agreed to provide the letters only after receiving assurances that neither their identities nor the names of their communities would be disclosed.

One community leader said of the meeting they had with authorities, “The government has pulled our ears to keep whatever is happening to ourselves. They warned us from receiving any letters or messages from the group and said if we must, for our safety, we must burn or tear the letters after they leave and not share them with anyone.” While some destroy the letters after the group leaves, some hand them over to authorities, and some keep theirs.

To protect interviewees and avoid exposing communities to potential reprisals, GGA is withholding the names of the specific communities visited during this research.

Analysis of the letters revealed a remarkable degree of consistency in both their presentation and messaging. All 16 documents prominently displayed the group’s name at the top. Nine featured the name in Arabic, Hausa, and English; two in Arabic and Hausa; and five exclusively in Arabic. All the letters had the name of an individual identifying himself as Moukhtar Sadiq, who described himself as the leader of the organisation. In the letters, he informed recipient communities that “we have not come to this land for oppression, but rather to preach the word of Allah”.

The contents of the letters reveal that ISSP seeks to frame its presence in Northwest Nigeria as a religious and ideological mission rather than one of oppression. In the correspondence, the group states that it came to the area to propagate the word of Allah and outlines a set of principles it expects communities to observe. These include the strict observance of the five daily prayers, abstention from sins and all acts prohibited by Allah, rejection of government laws on the grounds that they contradict Sharia, refusal to provide protection to individuals it describes as *azzalumai* (oppressors), and encouragement for community members to join the organisation in order to strengthen what it characterises as the cause of Allah.

Several community leaders said ISSP members promised employment, status, and recognition to those willing to join their ranks. Equally prominent, according to the communities, was the group reiterating that communities should refrain from supporting government forces against it.

The dating of the letters offers valuable insight into the likely chronology of ISSP’s presence in the region. Translations of the Hijri dates show that the group was already issuing letters as early as 24 December 2025 (4 Rajab 1447) and 30 December 2025 (10 Rajab 1447). These were followed by a significant concentration of correspondence in late March and early April 2026 – on 20 March (1 Shawwal 1447), 29 March (10 Shawwal 1447), 30 March (11 Shawwal 1447), and 9 April (21 Shawwal 1447) – suggesting an intensification of activity. Further letters appeared on 19 April (2 Dhul-Qa’dah 1447), and the most recent in the collection are dated 5 June (19 Zul-Hijjah 1447) and 9 June (23 Zul-Hijjah 1447), indicating sustained engagement through the first half of 2026.

Notably, majority of interviewees stated that their first direct encounters with ISSP occurred in 2026. Collectively, the testimonies and documentary evidence indicate that ISSP’s presence in Northwest Nigeria is recent and gathering momentum.

One community leader’s reported interaction with an ISSP member sheds further light on the group’s presence in Nigeria. According to the leader, the ISSP member informed him that they established a camp in Nigeria during Muharram 1447 – corresponding to 26 June to 25 July 2025.

“He told me that Muharram this year would mark one year of their presence in large numbers in Nigeria, but before setting up a camp, few members had been visiting Nigeria for some time to observe the place,” the leader explained.

## How ISSP distinguishes itself from Lakurawa

Perhaps the most consequential finding from GGA’s fieldwork is that ISSP is actively and deliberately distinguishing itself from Lakurawa. This distinction was consistently emphasised by community leaders and members who interacted with the group. This is particularly significant because of the portrayal of

Lakurawa in public discourse as synonymous with ISSP<sup>9</sup>. According to those interviewed, the group explicitly introduced itself as the Islamic State Sahel Province and took time during community engagements to explain its identity and objectives.

Few community leaders recalled that, during their first encounters with the group, they assumed its members were Lakurawa. They said ISSP members immediately corrected that perception, insisting that Lakurawa was a separate organisation operating mainly within Nigeria, whereas their own organisation operated across multiple countries in the Sahel. The community leader, referred to previously, said the ISSP member described Lakurawa as a “local” organisation while portraying ISSP as a regional movement spanning Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

The distinction also extends to ISSP’s messaging towards local populations. Interviewees reported that representatives of the group emphasised that they had not come to exploit communities but to fight oppressors like the Nigerian government and security forces.

This narrative stands in contrast to widespread experiences with Lakurawa. Across multiple communities, respondents contrasted ISSP’s messaging and action with Lakurawa’s practice of forced collection of zakat and other levies from residents, including punishing those who resist. Punishment includes death and kidnapping. ISSP members, according to interviewees, repeatedly referred to Lakurawa as *azzalumai* (oppressors), accusing them of exploiting civilians and extracting resources from already vulnerable communities. Some said ISSP members referred to Lakurawa as thieves, who are not different from bandits.

Equally revealing is the testimony of another community leader who developed an ongoing relationship with one of ISSP’s couriers after requesting additional information about the organisation to reassure members of his community. According to him, the courier welcomed the opportunity to explain the group’s background, and the two exchanged telephone numbers and remained in occasional contact.

Another community leader recounted that an ISSP member claimed the group comprised members from Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso and emerged in 2015 following internal disagreements within Al-Mourabitoun<sup>10</sup>. According to them, the organisation’s leader at the time was Adnan Abu Walid, who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. The ISSP member also reportedly stated that the group had operated in Niger’s Tillaberi Region since 2021 and had since their coming to Sokoto expanded into Tangaza, Binji, Silame and Illela local government areas.

The community leader recalled mentioning Dando Sibou, Lakurawa’s then leader in the Northwest, to the ISSP member during their conversation, but the ISSP member responded that he did not know him.

A comparison of the letters received by communities from ISSP and Lakurawa shows differences in how both groups relate with civilians. The first thing easily noticeable is how the letters are presented. All documents seen from ISSP were typed on what seems like letterheads, with the name of the organisation written boldly at the top. On the other hand, all communication from Lakurawa to communities were handwritten on plain sheets of paper, with no group name written at the top.

The contents and tones of the letters are also different. ISSP’s letters show that they are from a group that seeks to introduce itself to the people for the first time. This could explain why all the letters have the same content. The only differences are the names of communities they were addressed to.

In terms of tone, the ISSP letters adopt a conciliatory yet authoritative tone, presenting ISSP as a religious movement rather than an oppressive force while simultaneously asserting ideological and normative authority over local communities. Through a combination of reassurance, religious messaging, and prescriptive instructions, including the rejection of state laws and encouragement to join the organisation, ISSP seeks to legitimise its presence, undermine state authority, and cultivate local acceptance without resorting to explicit threats.

<sup>9</sup> ACLED (2025), New frontlines: Jihadist expansion is reshaping the Benin, Niger, and Nigeria borderlands: <https://acleddata.com/report/new-frontlines-jihadist-expansion-reshaping-benin-niger-and-nigeria-borderlands>

<sup>10</sup> Wikipedia (undated), Al-Mourabitoun (militant group): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Mourabitoun\\_\(militant\\_group\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Mourabitoun_(militant_group))

هـر داندو، رئيس مجموعة لاكورا،  
سوكوتو/كبي، اريو، قلاسا، كاراي،  
بابان، رافي، ساغو.

نعلمكم باننا سنشارك في الدعوة يوم الجمعة  
٢٠٢٠/٠٢/٢١

السلام عليكم.

بعد تحياتنا بالدين الاسلامي وتمنياتنا لكم  
بالخير، اننا رئيس مجموعة لاكورا سوكوتو  
كبي. أعلمكم باننا سنلتقي بكم يوم الجمعة  
لتقديم المعلمين الجدد المسؤولين عن  
خدمة الله

نشكركم على تعاونكم في نشر  
ديننا

داندو  
رئيس مجموعة لاكورا

**Lakurawa’s Da’awah letter**

From Dando, head of the Lakur Group, Sokoto/Kebbi.  
Community leaders: Karaye, Babban Rafi, Sago.  
We inform you that we are coming for Da’awah on Friday  
20/02/2026.  
21/01/2026

Peace be upon you.  
After greetings in the Islamic religion and wishing us well.  
I am the Head of the Lakur Group Sokoto Kebbi. I inform you  
that we will meet with you on Friday to introduce new clerics  
who will be in charge of the work of God.

Thank you for your cooperation in the development of  
our religion.

Dando  
The head of Lakur

عن رئيس مجموعة لاكورا، سوكوتو،  
كبي، زامفارا.

الى رئيس بلدية غوالي

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته  
اليوم ١٢ ربيع الاول ١٤٤٧، اننا، قائد عمل الله (داندو)  
اطيب اليكم هذه الرسالة لاعلم أهل هذه المنطقة المباركة  
انه اعتبارا من اليوم، ١٢ ربيع الاول، قد منع قطع الاشجار  
بسبب صناعة الجوازي او ذبح الاشجار او أي شيء  
اخر. طمانند عوظم الي التخلي عن أي خطة خطوية  
او استخدام الجيش لحماية مدينتكم. ثم ابلغوا  
الجنود في مدينتكم بضرورة مغادرتهم في أقرب  
وقت

نللكم الله آي علي شأن الإسلام والمسلمين  
امينما طانور في العالم

داندو (سibu)  
رئيس لاكورا

**Lakurawa letter to Gwalli**

From the Leader of the Lakur Group (Sokoto, Kebbi, Zamfara).  
To: The Community leader of Gwalli Town.

Peace be upon you.  
Today, 12 Rabi’ al-Awwal 1447 (4 September 2025), I, the  
leader of the jihadist movement (Dando), am writing this  
letter to inform the people of your blessed community that,  
effective from today, 12 Rabi’ al-Awwal, we have prohibited  
the felling of trees for the purpose of making charcoal, wood  
or any other related activities. We also call upon you to ensure  
that you completely abandon any system of government  
administration and refrain from using the military for the  
security of your town. Furthermore, you should inform the  
soldiers stationed in your town to ensure that they withdraw  
from this area within a short period of time.

May Allah elevate Islam and Muslims wherever they are in  
the world.

Dando (Sibu)  
Leader of the Lakur Group.

Figure 3: Lakurawa engagement letters issued to communities in Sokoto and Zamfara states.

By contrast, a Lakurawa letter to a community in Zamfara state, its first engagement with the community, is more directive and authoritative, issuing explicit instructions banning certain economic activities, calling on communities to abandon government structures and military protection, and demanding that soldiers leave the area. The contrast suggests that whereas ISSP is attempting to build local legitimacy and acceptance through ideological outreach, Lakurawa's messaging is more focused on asserting control and enforcing compliance over communities under its influence.

Another letter from Lakurawa to communities in Sokoto state during the 2026 Ramadan follows the same tone as the one discussed above. It adopts an authoritative and supervisory tone, using religious language to legitimise the group's claim to regulate community affairs. After the conventional Islamic greetings, the letter quickly transitions into issuing directives, ordering that all villages within the particular area of influence obtain the group's approval before conducting Ramadan tafsir sessions and contribute ₦100 million "for the service of the religion of Allah."

All communities visited said since their coming, ISSP members have not asked them to give it anything, whether zakat or money. In contrast, Lakurawa's first encounter with a community lays the marker for extraction.

While ISSP denounces Lakurawa to local communities, Lakurawa has been actively moving through communities that ISSP has visited, seeking to gather intelligence on its presence. In particular, Lakurawa is pressuring communities to hand over any letters received from ISSP and to report the group's arrivals, while, on the other hand, ISSP is promising protection from Lakurawa's predatory incursions.

On 4 June 2026, two Lakurawa fighters were intercepted by ISSP operatives in Kali village, Bagudo local government area of Kebbi State, while returning from purchasing recharge cards. According to local sources, the two men were brought back into the village, where residents were assembled before they were executed. ISSP members reportedly explained that the men were being killed because they were *azzalumai* who preyed on local communities.

When Lakurawa personnel later recovered the bodies, the Kachalla responsible for the Bagudo axis visited the community to establish what had occurred. Villagers explained that ISSP had been visiting the area for one month, preaching against support for the government, insisting that its campaign targeted only security forces, and promising to protect local populations, including from Lakurawa.

Few days later, Lakurawa's Northwest Nigeria commander, Isa Bello – popularly known as Abu Yazid – led dozens of fighters from Sokoto to Illo district in Bagudo to try and trace the attackers. After three unsuccessful days, they returned to Sokoto.

A community leader in Sokoto recounted that he recently attempted to contact Abu Yazid immediately after ISSP made its first visit to his community. However, he could not reach him by phone. By the time he eventually made contact, ISSP members had already departed. Nevertheless, the Lakurawa leader mobilised his men to the community the following day. The community leader confirmed that the Lakurawa leader informed him that he had been in Kebbi state after ISSP killed two of his fighters.

In another community in Sokoto on 15 June, Lakurawa members encountered a man visiting from a different community – one of the earliest settlements that ISSP had visited. Upon learning which community he was from, they attacked him, dissatisfied with his account of ISSP's visit. As the son of the community leader, the man had explained that the interaction had been between ISSP members and his father. When ISSP learned of the attack, it visited the community and assured the victim's father that it would establish a nearby camp to protect surrounding communities from further Lakurawa attacks.

One week later, on 22 June, the first clash between ISSP and Lakurawa broke out near Gaidau village in Sokoto state. The confrontation occurred after Lakurawa fighters, who had been tracking the ISSP unit from Raka in Tangaza local government area, finally caught up with them at that location. The ensuing firefight was intense and lasted five hours, plunging residents of Gaidau into panic as heavy gunfire echoed and flashes lit up the night sky. The following morning, villagers in Abarura, Gidan Hamma Dango, Ketti, and Tarke, all in Illela local government area, reported seeing dozens of motorcycles, believed to

be carrying ISSP fighters, crossing into Niger Republic. According to sources with direct knowledge of the confrontation, ISSP suffered 42 fatalities, while Lakurawa lost more than twice that number.

Six civilians, among them a woman and her child, who were traveling on motorcycles that night, were reportedly killed when Lakurawa fighters mistook them for ISSP operatives and opened fire from a distance.

The hostile dynamic between the two groups offers compelling reasons that the two are not aligned, underscoring the need for more nuanced assessments of the increasingly fragmented jihadist landscape emerging in Northwest and Northcentral Nigeria.

## A crowded jihadist landscape in Northwest and North Central Nigeria

The emergence of ISSP adds another layer of complexity to an already fragmented militant environment in Northwest and North Central Nigeria. Unlike the Northeast, where insecurity has largely revolved around the rivalry between the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS), the Northwest and North Central are characterised by the coexistence of multiple armed actors with differing motivations, organisational structures and ideological orientations.

In addition to numerous bandit factions, the regions host Lakurawa, JAS, Ansaru, ISWAP, JNIM, and the new entrant ISSP. The result is a fluid operating environment in which cooperation, competition and organisational realignment may likely occur simultaneously, making attribution of attacks and assessment of threat trajectories particularly challenging.

This complexity has often been obscured by the tendency to describe virtually all armed violence in the Northwest as “banditry.” While the label may capture the criminal motivations of many groups, it fails to account for the growing influence of ideologically

motivated organisations that pursue broader political and religious objectives. As jihadist groups establish deeper roots in the regions, understanding the relationships between these actors becomes as important as understanding each organisation individually.

The arrival of ISSP is particularly significant because it introduces into Northwest Nigeria a conflict that has already defined much of the contemporary Sahel. For several years, JNIM and ISSP have engaged in an intense struggle for influence, recruits and territorial control across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. That rivalry has frequently manifested itself in violent clashes and competing efforts to secure the allegiance of local communities.

There are already indications that elements of this competition are emerging inside Nigeria, with one of the first reported confrontations between ISSP and JNIM in Kebbi State in April 2026. Although the details remain difficult to independently verify, the reported incident is consistent with the broader pattern of competition observed elsewhere in the Sahel.

However, confrontation represents only one possible trajectory. Equally important is the prospect of strategic cooperation and organisational realignment among groups operating in the regions.

GGA's previous research<sup>11</sup> documented cordial relations between Lakurawa, JAS and JNIM, including reports that both Lakurawa and JAS contributed fighters to JNIM in early 2026. Sources familiar with ongoing discussions have also indicated that Lakurawa and JNIM have explored the possibility of a merger, although negotiations have reportedly encountered disagreements over leadership arrangements, resource-sharing mechanisms and operational priorities.

One of the principal sticking points in the Lakurawa-JNIM talks concerns strategy. According to GGA sources, JNIM encouraged a more aggressive posture towards the Nigerian state, advocating direct attacks on security forces and efforts to dismantle government presence in rural communities, including local government headquarters.

<sup>11</sup> Good Governance Africa (2026), Lakurawa: From transnational jihadist insertion in Northeast Nigeria to criminal-predatory governance in Northwest Nigeria: <https://digitalmallblobstorage.blob.core.windows.net/wp-content/2026/05/Lakurawa-Research-Report-N.pdf>

Lakurawa, by contrast, has generally prioritised consolidating influence within communities, extracting resources and avoiding sustained confrontation with state security forces wherever possible.

ISSP's emergence could alter these calculations. Competition among jihadist organisations may create incentives for groups to differentiate themselves through increased operational activity, while also encouraging tactical cooperation where interests converge. The resulting landscape is unlikely to be characterised by stable alliances. Instead, it is more likely to feature shifting patterns of rivalry and collaboration shaped by ideology, local politics, access to resources, leadership ambitions, and interests.

Bandit groups will remain central to these dynamics. Numbering in the tens of thousands<sup>12</sup> and lacking a unified command structure, they constitute the largest available recruitment pool for jihadist organisations seeking local knowledge, manpower and territorial access. Although many bandits have historically resisted full ideological integration because of their criminal motivations and reluctance to adopt strict religious codes governing alcohol, drugs and personal conduct, precedent suggests that pragmatic alliances remain possible.

The partnership between notorious bandit leader Dogo Gide and JAS, which culminated in the 2022 Abuja-Kaduna train attack<sup>13</sup>, demonstrated that operational cooperation can emerge despite ideological differences. Lakurawa has likewise recruited extensively from bandit networks. As competition among jihadist organisations intensifies, the contest for influence over these armed criminal constituencies may become one of the defining features of the regions' evolving security environment.

The principal analytical challenge is therefore no longer identifying individual organisations in isolation. Rather, it is understanding the increasingly interconnected ecosystem that links jihadist groups, bandit factions and local power structures across Northwest and Northcentral Nigeria.

## Does ISSP's expansion change the calculus of US-Nigeria counterterrorism cooperation?

ISSP's emergence in Northwest Nigeria also has significant implications for the evolving security partnership between Nigeria and the United States. Although details of the bilateral counterterrorism arrangement have not been made public, available information suggests that though the current cooperation is primarily concentrated on the Northeast, particularly against ISWAP and JAS, the Northwest and Northcentral<sup>14</sup> may also be part of the deal.

ISSP's expansion raises the possibility that jihadist actors are deliberately broadening the geographic scope of conflict in order to stretch Nigeria's security architecture and dilute military pressure in existing theatres. This would not be new. Both JAS and ISWAP expanded into the Northwest and Northcentral when military operations intensified in the Northeast during President Muhammadu Buhari's second tenure. Establishing cells outside their traditional areas of operation enabled them to diversify recruitment, create alternative logistical corridors and force security agencies to divide already limited resources across multiple fronts.

The speed of ISSP's expansion is itself noteworthy. Within a relatively short period, the group has established contact with dozens of communities across Sokoto and Kebbi states while simultaneously conducting ideological outreach and recruitment efforts. Whether this translates into sustained operational capability remains to be seen, but the pattern suggests a deliberate effort to embed itself within local environments rather than conduct isolated cross-border raids.

Developments elsewhere in the Sahel underscore why this trend deserves close attention. According to the 2026 Global Terrorism Index (GTI), JNIM and ISSP accounted for a disproportionate share of the world's deadliest terrorist violence in 2025. Together, the two organisations were responsible for 13 of the 20 deadliest attacks globally, causing 872 fatalities, equivalent to 70 percent of all casualties arising from those attacks. Their combined

<sup>12</sup> The Cable (2021), Matawalle: there are over 30,000 bandits in the northwest: <https://www.thecable.ng/matawalle-there-are-over-30000-bandits-in-the-north/>

<sup>13</sup> BBC (2022), Abuja-Kaduna train attack: Passengers killed after Nigeria gang hits rail link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60914481>

<sup>14</sup> US Embassy and Consulate in Nigeria (2026), Joint statement at the end of the first session of the US-Nigeria Joint Working Group to address Nigeria's country of particular concern designation: <https://ng.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-at-the-end-of-the-first-session-of-the-us-nigeria-joint-working-group-to-address-nigerias-country-of-particular-concern-designation/>

lethality illustrates how the epicentre of global jihadist violence has shifted increasingly towards the Sahel.

Viewed individually, JNIM emerged as the deadliest terrorist organisation among the two, accounting for nine of the 20 deadliest attacks and 653 fatalities, representing 51 percent of casualties from the top 20 attacks worldwide. ISSP accounted for four attacks and 219 fatalities, equivalent to 17 percent of total casualties. The data highlight not only the operational sophistication of both organisations but also their growing strategic significance within the broader Islamic State and al-Qaeda ecosystems.

Against this backdrop, excluding Northwest and Northcentral regions from the counterterrorism partnership would be counterproductive as it would risk overlooking one of the most rapidly evolving theatres of extremist activity on the continent. If the objective of US-Nigeria security cooperation is to degrade transnational jihadist networks, developments documented by GGA suggest that attention should not be confined to the Northeast alone.

At the same time, the primary responsibility for addressing Nigeria's security challenges rests with the Nigerian state. International partnerships can provide intelligence, training and operational support, but they cannot substitute for a coherent national strategy. The emergence of ISSP should therefore be viewed not merely as a challenge for bilateral security cooperation but as a test of Nigeria's broader capacity to anticipate, prevent and respond to the diffusion of Sahelian jihadist networks into its own territory.

Recent national trends reinforce the urgency of such a response. According to the latest GTI, Nigeria recorded the largest absolute increase in terrorism-related deaths globally in 2025, with fatalities rising by 46.2 percent, from 513 in 2024 to 750 in 2025. Terrorist incidents increased by 43 percent, from 120 to 171 attacks, pushing Nigeria from sixth to fourth among the world's most terrorised countries.

The deterioration was driven largely by ISWAP and JAS, which together accounted for 82.8 percent of terrorism-related deaths, while Borno State remained the epicentre of violence, recording 67 percent of attacks and 72 percent of fatalities. Equally concerning is the continued shift in targeting patterns, with civilians accounting for 67 percent of all terrorism deaths in 2025, compared with 19 percent for military personnel. More broadly, four of the world's five most terrorism-affected countries are now located in the Sahel, including Nigeria, underscoring the region's growing importance in the global terrorism landscape.

The evidence therefore points towards a simple conclusion: the geographic centre of gravity of jihadist violence is expanding rather than contracting. Unless counterterrorism planning evolves to reflect this reality, Nigeria risks confronting an increasingly interconnected insurgent ecosystem stretching from the central Sahel into its own Northwest and Northcentral regions.

## Can Nigeria counter the expansion of Sahelian jihadists?

The emergence of ISSP in Northwest Nigeria should not be viewed as an isolated security incident but as part of a broader regional trend in which instability in the central Sahel is increasingly spilling across national borders. The movement of fighters, weapons, ideology and logistics between Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria has created a transnational threat environment that cannot be effectively addressed through purely domestic responses.

On paper, Nigeria possesses a comprehensive counterterrorism framework. The National Counter-Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST) recognises that defeating terrorism requires more than military force and is built around multiple pillars encompassing prevention, law enforcement, intelligence, capacity building and post-conflict recovery. The challenge has been less one of policy design than of implementation.

In practice, Nigeria's response has remained overwhelmingly kinetic. Military operations have

undoubtedly delivered tactical successes, including the elimination of senior commanders, destruction of camps and recovery of territory. Yet these gains have often proved temporary, with armed groups adapting through decentralisation, geographical expansion and recruitment into new areas. The spread of jihadist organisations from the Northeast into the Northwest and Northcentral illustrates this adaptive capacity.

The experience of ISSP itself demonstrates how extremist organisations exploit governance gaps rather than simply military weaknesses. Evidence gathered by GGA suggests that the group's strategy in Northwest Nigeria extends beyond armed operations to include direct engagement with communities, dissemination of ideological messaging and attempts to cultivate local legitimacy. By reassuring residents that it seeks only to fight the government and security forces while promising protection and employment opportunities for young people, ISSP appears to be pursuing a gradual embedding strategy designed to reduce resistance to its presence.

This approach highlights the limitations of relying exclusively on force. Military operations can disrupt armed groups, but they cannot by themselves address the governance deficits, socioeconomic exclusion and weak state presence that make communities vulnerable to extremist influence. Existing Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) initiatives and deradicalisation programmes such as Operation Safe Corridor remain important components of Nigeria's response but have yet to achieve the scale necessary to offset recruitment by expanding jihadist organisations.

A further weakness lies in the regional dimension of Nigeria's strategy. Much of the current response remains focused on defending Nigerian territory rather than addressing the transnational ecosystems that sustain armed groups. Yet the Sahel continues to serve as a major source of weapons, experienced fighters, logistical networks and ideological influence for organisations operating inside Nigeria.

This reality makes regional cooperation indispensable. Nigeria has taken positive steps through bilateral collaboration with Benin Republic<sup>15</sup> along the borders and ongoing discussions regarding the possible establishment of a Multinational Joint Task Force sector covering the Northwest. These initiatives recognise that insecurity along Nigeria's northwestern border cannot be effectively managed by unilateral action alone.

However, engagement with the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) – Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – remains equally important despite broader diplomatic and political differences. JNIM and ISSP derive much of their operational strength from activities within these countries, and developments there are increasingly shaping security outcomes inside Nigeria. Intelligence sharing, border management, disruption of cross-border logistics and coordinated action against recruitment networks would therefore contribute significantly to preventing further expansion.

Ultimately, Nigeria's challenge is no longer confined to defeating individual terrorist organisations. It is preventing the consolidation of an integrated Sahelian jihadist theatre stretching across international boundaries into Northwest and Northcentral Nigeria. That objective will require a strategy that combines sustained military pressure with stronger local governance, expanded prevention programmes, enhanced border management and pragmatic regional cooperation.

The findings presented in this research suggest that such adaptation is becoming increasingly urgent. Field evidence indicates that ISSP has moved beyond sporadic incursions to establish an organised presence in multiple communities, while simultaneously differentiating itself from Lakurawa and embedding itself within local social environments. Whether this presence evolves into a sustained insurgency will depend not only on the group's own capabilities but also on the speed and coherence of Nigeria's response.

<sup>15</sup> All Africa (2026), Nigeria: Benin and Nigeria join forces to fight growing cross-border terrorism: <https://allafrica.com/stories/202603090010.html>

## Implications

### Fragmentation of jihadist actors complicates threat assessment and attribution

The fragmentation of jihadist actors in Northwest and North Central Nigeria complicates threat assessment and attribution, as attacks may be carried out by one group but claimed by another, as the Giro Masa incident illustrates. This makes it difficult for security forces to accurately identify adversaries and tailor responses accordingly.

### ISSP's coming introduces into Nigeria the intense jihadist rivalry in the Sahel

With JNIM already present in Nigeria, the coming of ISSP brings with it the intense jihadist rivalry that has defined the contemporary Sahel, where both groups have competed for influence, recruits, and territorial control. This competition could drive escalation while also creating opportunities for tactical cooperation with other actors in Nigeria.

### Distinction between ISSP and Lakurawa has implications for counterterrorism strategy

The distinction between ISSP and Lakurawa has significant implications for counterterrorism strategy, as treating the two as synonymous risks misdirecting resources. Confusing a locally rooted predatory group with a transnational jihadist movement could lead to strategies that address symptoms without understanding underlying dynamics.

### ISSP's expansion raises concerns about Nigerian security forces' capacity

The speed of ISSP's expansion raises concerns about the ability of Nigerian security forces to respond to a rapidly evolving threat, as the group has continued to spread rapidly across communities within a short period. Its deliberate strategy of embedding itself within local environments suggests a degree of organisational capacity that warrants close attention.

### ISSP's presence in Nigeria underscores the transnational nature of the jihadist threat

The expansion of ISSP into Northwest Nigeria underscores the transnational nature of the jihadist threat, as the group draws fighters, ideology, and logistical support from the broader Sahel. This means that developments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger may increasingly shape security outcomes inside Nigeria.

### ISSP's coming shows the limitations of a purely kinetic approach to insecurity

The emergence of ISSP highlights the limitations of a purely kinetic approach to counterterrorism, as military operations cannot by themselves address the governance deficits and weak state presence that make communities vulnerable to extremist influence. Unless these gaps are addressed, military gains are likely to remain temporary and reversible.

## Recommendations

### For the Nigerian government

- Differentiate between armed groups in strategic planning:** The Nigerian government should avoid treating all armed groups in the Northwest and North Central as a single undifferentiated threat. ISSP, Lakurawa, JNIM, bandit factions, and other actors have different motivations, organisational structures, and operational logics. Counterterrorism strategies should reflect these differences and be tailored accordingly.
- Strengthen intelligence gathering and analysis:** The ability of ISSP to establish a presence in dozens of communities without early detection suggests gaps in intelligence collection. Investment in human intelligence, community-based early warning systems, and information-sharing mechanisms is essential to anticipate and pre-empt the expansion of armed groups.
- Address governance deficits and service delivery gaps:** The strategy pursued by many jihadist groups of engaging communities, offering protection, and promising employment opportunities exploits weaknesses in state presence. The Nigerian government, particularly state governments, should prioritise the extension of basic services – security, justice, healthcare, and education – to underserved rural communities. Preventing extremist influence is ultimately more effective and less costly than responding to insurgencies after they have taken root.
- Expand and strengthen preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) programmes:** Existing initiatives such as Operation Safe Corridor remain limited in scale and impact. The government should increase investment in deradicalisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration programmes, while also supporting community-led prevention efforts that address the drivers of recruitment.

- **Enhance coordination between security forces:** The multiplicity of government actors operating in the regions – the military, police, intelligence agencies, civil defence corps – requires robust coordination mechanisms to avoid duplication, maximise and complement deployment, ensure information sharing, and present a unified response to threats.
- **Engage with communities transparently and rebuild trust:** The reluctance of community leaders to share information about ISSP, driven by fear of government reprisals, undermines intelligence gathering and creates space for armed groups to operate. The government should adopt transparent engagement strategies that protect informants and build trust with local populations.
- **Expand counterterrorism cooperation beyond the Northeast:** Current US-Nigeria counterterrorism cooperation is primarily concentrated on the Northeast. The emergence of ISSP in the Northwest suggests that attention should not be confined to one theatre. The Northwest and North Central should be incorporated into bilateral security frameworks.
- **Invest in conflict prevention and addressing root causes:** International partners should support programmes that address the socioeconomic drivers of extremism – poverty, youth unemployment, weak governance, and marginalisation. Prevention is ultimately more sustainable than military response.

#### For international partners

- **Support regional counterterrorism cooperation:** The transnational nature of the jihadist threat requires coordinated action across borders. International partners should support intelligence sharing, joint operations, and capacity building within the Multinational Joint Task Force and other regional frameworks.
- **Engage with the Alliance of Sahel States (AES):** Despite diplomatic and political differences, pragmatism demands engagement with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. ISSP and JNIM derive much of their operational strength from activities within these countries. Intelligence sharing, border management, and coordinated action against recruitment networks require cooperation with AES states.

#### For researchers and analysts

**Avoid conflating armed groups:** Analysts should resist the tendency to treat all armed actors in the Northwest as interchangeable. Rigorous attribution and nuanced assessment are essential for understanding threat trajectories.

**Continue field-based research:** The findings of this report demonstrate the value of original field research in challenging assumptions and generating evidence-based analysis. Continued investment in community-level research is essential for tracking the evolution of armed groups and their relationships with local populations.

## Conclusion

The emergence of the Islamic State Sahel Province in Northwest Nigeria represents a significant development in the country's security landscape. This report has demonstrated that ISSP has established an independent organisational presence in Sokoto and Kebbi states and is actively distinguishing itself from Lakurawa, contrary to the popular narrative that treats the two as synonymous.

The evidence gathered through interviews with community leaders, analysis of correspondence, and the dynamic between the two, as reflected in their competing engagement with local communities, reveals a pattern of hostility and competition rather than collaboration. ISSP's strategy of engaging communities, disseminating ideological messaging, and promising protection and employment opportunities stands in contrast to Lakurawa's practice of extraction and coercion. The execution of Lakurawa fighters by ISSP operatives and the groups' competing efforts to secure local allegiance further underscore their distinct organisational identities.

However, the arrival of ISSP also introduces into Nigeria the intense jihadist rivalry that has defined the contemporary Sahel. The competition between ISSP and JNIM for influence, recruits, and territorial control has already manifested in reported clashes within Nigerian territory. This fragmentation creates new challenges for security forces, as multiple armed actors with differing motivations and operational logics operate in a fluid and contested environment.

The implications for counterterrorism strategy are significant. Treating all armed groups as a single undifferentiated threat risks misdirecting resources and developing ineffective responses. Addressing the challenge requires a nuanced understanding of the motivations, strategies, and relationships of each actor. It also requires recognising that Northwest Nigeria is becoming part of a wider Sahelian conflict system, in which alliances, rivalries, and recruitment networks increasingly transcend national borders.

Military pressure will remain necessary, but it will not by itself eliminate the threat. Armed groups exploit governance deficits, socioeconomic exclusion, and weak state presence. Unless these vulnerabilities are addressed, military gains will remain partial and temporary. Prevention, through improved governance, service delivery, community engagement, and regional cooperation, will be essential for breaking the cycle of violence.

The findings presented in this research suggest that Nigeria's security challenges are more complex and becoming more interconnected with the wider Sahel. The fragmentation of jihadist actors, the intensification of inter-group competition, and the expansion of armed groups into new geographies all point towards the need for a strategy that is as adaptive, integrated, and regional as the threat it seeks to counter.

The central conclusion of this report is therefore straightforward: the emergence of ISSP in Northwest Nigeria is not an isolated development but part of a broader regional realignment. Responding effectively will require recognising that the Northwest and North Central are becoming part of a Sahelian conflict system in which borders matter less than networks, and in which the distinction between local banditry and transnational jihadism is increasingly blurred. Nigeria's counterterrorism strategy must evolve to reflect this reality, or risk confronting an ever-expanding and increasingly interconnected insurgent ecosystem.



**ABOVE:** Men ride past a burnt truck following the attack in Woro, Kwara State, in Nigeria, in February 2026.

Photo: Light Orlye Tamunotonye / AFP

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