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2017 and 2018 had confirmed the pre-eminence of Boko Haram's splinter faction known as the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), which broke away from Boko Haram's historic leader Abubakar Shekau around mid-2016. Building from a multi-pronged criticism of Shekau and enjoying some direct, though limited, **support from the Islamic State** (IS), ISWAP reconnected to the population in and around the resource-rich Lake Chad area, established **a proto-state**, and focused on military targets. As the years passed, it proved increasingly able in military terms, launching devastating attacks on **ever bigger** military bases. 2019 saw Nigeria and its regional partners trying to adapt to the challenge of ISWAP, with uneven success and consequences. Despite these changes in the response and its own internal challenges, ISWAP demonstrates its resilience.

## Adapting to the challenge of ISWAP?

The Nigerian authorities took time to acknowledge the reality of ISWAP. For some time, they repeated their victory claims and kept their focus on Shekau, who seemed like the big prize. But this changed as a result of **ISWAP's successes**, with the organization picking up more weapons from each successful attack on military units, to launch bigger and more frequent attacks. The peak came in December 2018, when ISWAP seized the Nigerian city and military base of Baga on the shores of Lake Chad. It was a powerful symbol as Baga hosted the headquarters of the Sector 3 of the **Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)**, which coordinates the operations of troops from the four Lake Chad states – Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. Tellingly, from October 2018, the Nigerian military began distinguishing ISWAP from Shekau's group in their statements<sup>[1]</sup>.

2019 marked a series of changes in the military response. While **Nigeria remained reluctant** towards Western offers for increased assistance, President Muhammadu Buhari reached out to the neighbouring states, meeting them in N'Djamena in November 2018. As a result, in February 2019, Chadian troops, which had played **a key role in the counter-offensive** against Boko Haram in 2015, came back into Borno, North-Eastern Nigeria, engaging ISWAP. Also, the MNJTF increased its pace of operations, and the Lake Chad countries resumed attempts to stifle trade to and from the Lake, notably the trade in dried fish from which ISWAP has benefited. The ban seems to be enforced unevenly however, as some fish still reaches the Nigerian market through the other countries. Also, **regional cooperation is difficult** to sustain. It is thus not clear what is behind Chad's apparently unilateral decision to withdraw its troops from Borno in January 2020: a simple rotation of troops (Chadian soldiers are apparently due back, following a visit by Borno State governor to N'Djamena)? A reaction to renewed jihadi pressure on the Chadian side of Lake Chad? Or Chadian frustration with Nigeria's own response?

Another development – an implicit admission of the gaps in the response – was Borno State's government decision to **increase recruitment of vigilantes**, instead of demobilizing them as had been earlier envisaged. This decision is apparently part of a longer-term plan to prepare security conditions for the redeployment of the **millions of IDPs** (internally displaced persons) to their communities.

A major change came in August 2019, with General Olusegun Adeniyi taking over as the new Nigerian Army's Theatre Commander for operations in Borno. He implemented **a radical change** in northern Borno, regrouping small units into "super camps" with stronger defences, to avoid the risk of ISWAP overrunning

them and plundering their supplies. While this **seemed to reduce** military casualties, it remains to be seen whether the mobile strike forces supposed to operate from the super camps materialise.

General Adeniyi also gave a turn of the screw on humanitarian organisations, picking up allegations that Boko Haram factions were **benefiting from humanitarian assistance**. It is difficult to know whether the military sincerely believed that or if they wanted to increase control over or stifle humanitarian assistance, hoping it would have weakened ISWAP. While it is obvious that some assistance ends up in the **jihadis' hands through raids**, through resale or through their relatives in IDP camps, and while it is possible that some NGO sub-contractors engage in side-deals, there is **no evidence** so far that NGOs assist any of Boko Haram's factions. In September 2019, two major international NGOs were shut down, though eventually the Nigerian civilian authorities and United Nations stepped in finding a new balance, streamline and structure of the relationship between the various stakeholders. The NGOs in question resumed operations in November 2019. What is clear so far is that humanitarian access has degraded, with major roads now insecure, and that the humanitarian situation remains critical and may have deteriorated in many places. There are reportedly over one million people in grey zones under the **influence of Boko Haram** factions. This is all the more an issue as ISWAP is trying to convince people to move into its areas of control, arguing life chances are better there.

## The travails of ISWAP

ISWAP is still operating **its proto-state** on and around much of the southwestern portion of Lake Chad, providing some healthcare, regulating prices, and levying taxes. It also maintains a significant permanent presence in the Alagarno forest, at the border between Borno and Yobe State, northern Nigeria. It is able to attract IDPs either as temporary labour or as non-militant inhabitants. Many civilians **do not support ISWAP** but find it reliable and better to live with than the IDP camps. The harsh conditions in the IDP camps in government-controlled areas, notably **the absence of economic opportunities**, are a serious problem.

On the peripheries of Lake Chad, however, outside of ISWAP's area of direct control, one notes an increase in banditry, kidnapping for ransom, and some small-scale violent attacks on civilians. This **predatory violence** may in part owe to ISWAP members operating with or without the approval of the central command, as ISWAP is experiencing is more pressed for resources – fuel, money, vehicles and weapons. This pressure owes to a combination of factors: successful raids by the air forces of the Lake Chad states, diminished access to military supplies as a result of the super-camp strategy, the flooding of the Lake area during the rainy season of 2019, and possibly also **a drop in financial assistance** from the IS (even small amounts seem to have an impact on a cheap insurgency), likely aggravated by the killing of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. ISWAP's statehood and astuteness come out in the fact that it has changed its **pricing policy** to adapt to the current tension on food supply: to encourage supply, it has banned the exit from its area of locally produced foodstuff (hitherto allowed) and has dropped all price caps.

ISWAP seems to have tried to **adapt its offensive modus operandi**, testing the super camps with mortar attacks, vehicle-borne explosive devices and raids while targeting convoys with ambushes and IEDS. It makes the most of its greater **freedom of movement**, making the most of the looser military grid. It has reduced its footprint on the north and east of Lake Chad to concentrate on the southwestern part of the Lake and intensify its efforts in the east of Yobe State and in southern Borno, searching for **weaker military targets**. It has been using roadblocks, capturing travelling military, NGO workers and police and Christians and try to obtain ransom or organize the trademark Islamic State executions.

Internal tensions have been nagging ISWAP since the execution of its inspirer Mamman Nur in 2018. At least one significant ISWAP commander **defected in 2019** with a dozen men, and others are reportedly keen on a negotiated exit. Many sources indicate internal tensions over **a variety of fault-lines**, from doctrine to ethnic balance through to the relationship with Shekau. In January 2020, there were reports that the IS had reinstated Habib Yusuf (Abu Musab al-Barnawi), the son of Boko Haram's founder Mohamed Yusuf, who had been replaced as the *wali* of ISWAP in March 2019 by Ba Idrissa (Abdullah Ibn Umar Idriss al-Barnawi). As for the open controversy between Boko Haram and ISWAP, it has gone silent. A pro-Shekau faction (so called "Bakura") has tried to profit from ISWAP's change of focus to broaden its operations on Lake Chad, resulting in some violence **between the two groups**. But ISWAP does not go after Shekau – the IS policy of

“live and let live” still obtains. Given the bad blood between ISWAP and the mercurial, autocratic nature of Shekau, a reconciliation seems **rather unlikely**, though tensions within ISWAP itself may affect the balance. Its collective leadership structure and the influence of the IS may make ISWAP **more resilient** to internal tensions than Shekau's faction.

ISWAP's success has finally attracted a **stronger response** by Nigeria and its regional allies. The response, however, still **lacks coherence** and comes with significant **humanitarian costs** that may backfire at some point. ISWAP, while shaken by international and external shocks, keeps adapting.

## NOTES:

[1] Shekau's group reverted to its previous name of Jama'at Ahlus Sunnah li Dawah wal Jihad (JASDJ).

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