



Beyond Borno: Islamic State's Expansion into Southern Nigeria

by Jacob Zenn^a

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Although the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) has historically been deeply rooted in northeastern Nigeria, recent patterns demonstrate that it is expanding operations to the more economically prosperous and majority Christian south.
- The most plausible explanations for ISWAP's move south are to "outbid" the rival Sunni Muslim Group for Preaching and Jihad (JASDJ); to follow Islamic State (IS) "core" directives to attract attention by attacking Christians and other high-profile targets; and to divert the Nigerian army's attention from the north and relieve counterterrorism pressure near ISWAP's main bases.
- Beyond these heightened risks, ISWAP's southern expansion threatens U.S. interests in Nigeria, Nigeria's national security, and West African security more broadly.

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP)¹, commonly referred to as "Boko Haram (Western education is sinful)," has become the most prolific Islamic State (IS) "province" outside of Iraq and Syria in terms of the number of attacks and the propaganda photos and videos that it releases.² Since the group's formation in 2002-2003 and

launch of insurgency operations in 2009, ISWAP has predominantly been based and carried out attacks in northeastern Nigeria's Borno State, Borno's domestic borderlands with Yobe and Adamawa States, and Borno's international borderlands with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon in the Lake Chad region.³ ISWAP has generally not

Authors

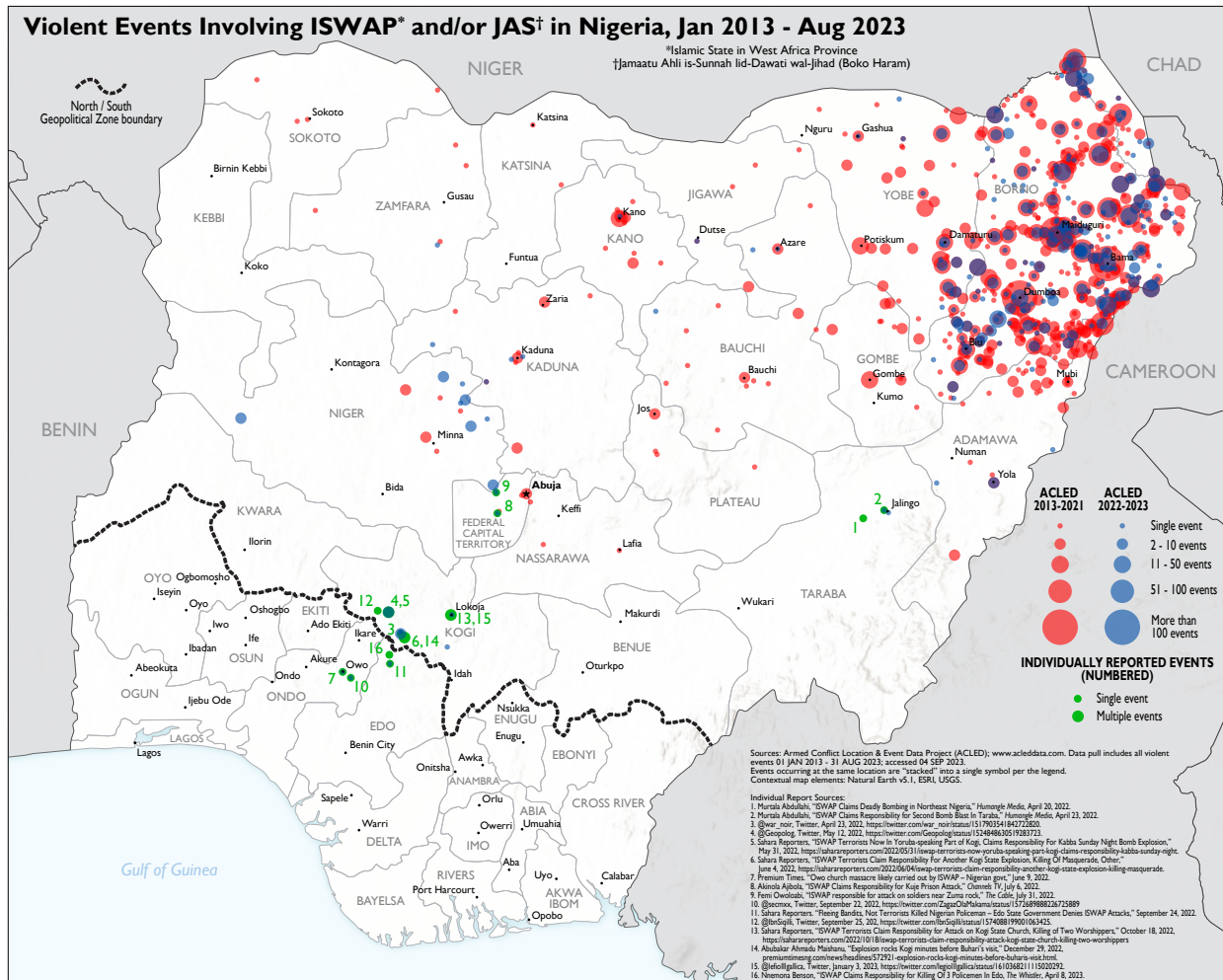
a. **Jacob Zenn** is a research analyst under contract for the U.S. Army's Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO), Fort Leavenworth, KS. Focusing primarily on West Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia with an emphasis on transnational terrorism and the intersection between geopolitics and international security, he has published in multiple academic journals, such as *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, *Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, *African Security*, and *Journal for De-Radicalization*. He is also the author of *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria*, which was published in April 2020 by Lynne Rienner in association with the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, University of St Andrews. Zenn is the editor of *The Jamestown Foundation's Terrorism Monitor* and *Militant Leadership Monitor* publications and sits on the editorial board of *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* and is an adjunct associate professor on African Armed Movements at Georgetown University's Security Studies Program.

been a national-level threat in Nigeria due to the limitations of its expansion beyond Borno. However, a series of unprecedented ISWAP attacks since April 2022 have established for the first time that the group is operating and conducting attacks in southern Nigeria. This indicates the group may no longer be contained around Borno.

The emergence of ISWAP cells outside the Lake Chad region poses a risk that the group will not only entrench itself outside its historical base in the northeast, but also that the group's presence in the south will have broader national consequences. ISWAP's southward expansion comes amid rampant violence by bandit factions in northwestern Nigeria. This has fueled concerns of ISWAP and its rivals—JASDJ (or as it is also known, the "Shekau faction") as well as the al-

Qaeda-affiliated Ansaru faction—also expanding across the north and allying with the bandits in the northwest. Several videos and statements from these three factions have indicated the process of merging with the bandits is in the nascent stages. Meanwhile, herder-farmer conflicts in the volatile "Middle Belt" in central Nigeria have also raised fears that ISWAP could threaten the capital, Abuja, and unsettle religious tensions in towns that are divided roughly equally between Muslim and Christian populations.

The oil-producing regions in southern Nigeria provide the vast majority of the government revenue needed to develop the country's infrastructure and provide welfare for the Nigerian citizenry. However, ISWAP's southern expansion jeopardizes the economic well-being of Nigeria and risks causing



backlash against Muslims by the predominantly Christian southern Nigerian population. This could, in turn, trigger “retaliatory violence” from ISWAP, Ansaru, or JASDJ, whose narratives have all promoted “defending Muslims” from the Nigerian government and Christians. If ISWAP continues to expand its insurgency to the south, then the group could also co-opt Nigeria’s other armed groups, which would become the most significant strategic development for the group in its history.

ISWAP’s expansion warrants attention from the Nigerian government, international counterterrorism agencies, humanitarian organizations and corporations whose operations would be affected by this expansion. ISWAP and its rival factions—as well as Nigeria’s internal corruption and other domestic political, economic, and security challenges—have diminished Nigeria’s presence on the regional scene over the past several decades. The fear about Nigeria—known as the “Giant of Africa”—has been, that if the giant becomes “sick,” then the whole of Africa will also feel the symptoms.

If ISWAP becomes a national-level security threat, it will have an impact well beyond the country’s own borders. Instability in Nigeria could impact global commodities, such as oil, and U.S. businesses with assets and operations in Nigeria. Beyond Nigerian and regional instability, the United States has an interest in seeing IS’s most prolific “province”—ISWAP—defeated, or at least curtailed militarily, to ensure the broader global campaign against IS and its provinces has lasting success. In sum, while an ISWAP contained in Borno is a concern, an expansionary ISWAP operating in southern Nigeria and other regions, such as northwestern Nigeria, brings a whole new array of unpredictable threats to the fore.

Stalled Jihadism in Southern Nigeria (2002-2012)

ISWAP’s origins as an insurgent movement can be traced to 2002, when the Nigerian government began cracking down on the group’s predecessor,

“The Nigerian Taliban,” and finally killed its leader, Muhammed Ali, and several dozen of his followers in December 2003. After the “Nigerian Taliban” was dismantled in 2004, the group came under the leadership of the preacher Muhammed Yusuf, who had been Ali’s preaching partner. Yusuf and his deputy Abubakar Shekau based the movement in Maiduguri, Borno’s capital. Yusuf was unique among other Nigerian Salafi preachers with wide followings because he explicitly praised al-Qaeda and the Taliban.⁴

Much like the crackdown in late 2003, albeit larger in scale, in July 2009, the Nigerian government expropriated Yusuf’s funds and seized his mosques, killing Yusuf and several hundred of his followers in an attempt to wipe out the movement.⁵ These clashes with Yusuf’s followers occurred in Maiduguri and several other northern Nigerian cities. A minority of Yusuf’s followers involved in the clashes were southern Nigerians, including Christian converts to Islam living in the north. However, Yusuf’s movement and the violence remained almost exclusively in northeastern Nigeria.

After Yusuf’s death, Shekau announced himself the leader of the group, known then as Yusufiya, or “followers of Yusuf,” but now he formally named the group *Jama’atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda’Awati Wal-Jihad (Sunni Muslim Group for Preaching and Jihad, or JASDJ)*⁶. Shekau and his fighters were in hiding in northeastern Nigeria and neighboring borderlands of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. However, several dozen fighters traveled to the Sahel to train with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to conduct what AQIM termed “special operations.”⁷ Starting with a September 2010 prison break to free roughly 750 members who were imprisoned in northeastern Bauchi State, JASDJ began conducting regular attacks in northeastern Nigeria, and especially Maiduguri. These attacks consisted mostly of arson, hit-and-run shootings, and small-scale bombings targeting politicians, Islamic scholars, and other opponents of the group, which indicated an insurgency was newly underway.

In June and August 2011, JASDJ shocked Nigeria and the international community when it conducted suicide car bombings in the central region at the federal police and UN headquarters in the capital, Abuja. JASDJ statements further indicated these and the approximately 30 suicide and car bombings over the next two years were achieved with support from al-Shabaab and AQIM's training for "special operations."⁸ Attacks in the volatile central Nigeria region, where Muslims and Christians have clashed since the 1970s, targeted the federal government, churches, or other "Christian" targets, such as bars, rekindling fears of interreligious violence in a way that the more frequent attacks in northeastern Nigeria had not.⁹

Despite JASDJ's reach into central Nigeria and the north-central city of Kano with "special operations," the vast majority of JASDJ attacks remained relatively small-scale and contained to its heartland in northeastern Nigeria, especially Maiduguri. According to a data-set in the *Perspectives on Terrorism* journal, JASDJ conducted 36 total suicide bombings, car bombings and suicide car bombings in Nigeria from June 2011 until the end of December 2012 (31 of those 36 attacks were person-borne or person-in-vehicle borne suicide attacks) and 27 of those 36 attacks, or 75 percent, were outside of northeastern Nigeria.¹⁰ Thus, JASDJ from 2011 until around 2013 remained a predominantly northeastern Nigerian operation, but the majority of sophisticated attacks, or "special operations," occurred in central Nigeria and Kano. As traumatizing and damaging as the group's attacks were, they still were far removed from predominantly Christian southern Nigeria and posed little risk to oil companies operating in the Niger Delta.

The one exception to attacks in southern Nigeria was *Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis-Sudan* (Ansaru), which separated from Shekau's JASDJ in January 2012. Ansaru claimed that Shekau was "excessive and deviant" and was harming the image of "jihad" by killing innocent Muslim civilians.¹¹ Whereas

Shekau recruited predominantly ethnic Kanuri fighters from northeastern Nigeria, Ansaru was comprised mostly of Fulanis and Hausas from northwestern and central Nigeria. Ansaru also welcomed other ethnicities, including Ebiras from the state of Kogi, which is south of Abuja and is geographically in the southern half of Nigeria but is considered "politically north." Ansaru's attacks involved kidnappings of foreign engineers in northern Nigerian cities where JASDJ rarely operated. In addition, Ansaru carried out a successful prison break in Abuja and an ambush on Nigerian troops in Kogi, who were planning to support Malian troops to combat AQIM in 2013. At the time, the attack in Kogi was the southernmost attack since the insurgency began in 2009.

What Ansaru possessed that ISWAP and Shekau's faction lacked was recruits from all around Nigeria and narratives focusing on reviving the Fulani-led pre-colonial state of Usman dan Fodio. Such narratives appealed to Fulanis and Hausas, with whom Fulanis had intermarried over the past centuries. The ancestors of Kanuris in northeastern Nigeria, in contrast, had fought dan Fodio during his 18th-century jihad. This indicates that if ISWAP could exploit its "global" identity and employ narratives that appealed to all Nigerians, then it could expand to southern Nigeria like Ansaru and even influence some Ansaru members to defect to ISWAP. Although Ansaru's forays toward southern Nigeria were not consistent, the group's southern expansion provided a template for ISWAP's expansion into the region one decade later. During that decade, however, the insurgency consolidated in the northeast.

Consolidation in the North (2012-2022)

From 2013 onwards, Ansaru stagnated and nearly disappeared. Several factors contributed to this quiescence, including JASDJ's killing of its leaders; Nigerian security forces raids on its hideouts in response to kidnappings of foreign personnel; French operations to push AQIM out of its main bases in the Sahel from which it could advise and support cells in Nigeria; and its

members' reintegration into JASDJ by coercion or to join the then-"winning team".¹² Shekau's fighters in JASDJ, meanwhile, abandoned central Nigeria operations in 2013, focusing their efforts on Borno and its borderlands. The Nigerian army was unprepared for JASDJ, underestimating its size and skill to conduct raids on towns and cities to conquer territory, and failed to prevent JASDJ from achieving its objectives.

JASDJ subsequently took control of large swathes of Borno and its borderlands and seized an area that was roughly the size of the U.S. State of Maryland.¹³ The group consolidated in the northeast to such an extent that from 2015 until 2022, the group conducted virtually no attacks outside of that region. JASDJ's threat was all but extinguished in central and especially southern Nigeria and the group was primarily active in conducting attacks only in northeastern Nigeria.

During this period of consolidation, expansion was not the priority for JASDJ, which sought instead to govern territory in the northeast. This included implementing strict sharia; taxing fishermen, farmers, herders, and other local industries; and holding large prayer gatherings where the group conveyed its ideology to villagers. Taxation not only sustained the group members' livelihoods in Borno and its environs, but also provided funds for militant purposes. The group could purchase weapons on the black market and develop nationwide logistics networks for anything ranging from computers to fuel. These funds also supported the logistics networks the group used to expand the insurgency outside the core areas in the northeast and provided financial incentives to new recruits in the northwest or south or to finance the establishment of bases for veteran members to deploy to those regions.

The key organizational change for JASDJ during this period was in March 2015, when Shekau pledged allegiance to IS, which led to the group's rebranding as the Islamic State in West Africa Province.¹⁴ The pledge resulted from a courtship between IS and Shekau that began after Shekau

claimed JASDJ's kidnapping and enslavement of more than 200 mostly Christian girls in Chibok, Borno State in May 2014. Shekau was eventually expelled from the leadership of ISWAP in August 2016 for defying IS orders and being too ruthless for even IS's ideology. He then resurrected JASDJ, which had been non-existent since March 2015, creating two rival groups—ISWAP and JASDJ—alongside their largely defunct mutual rival, Ansaru. ISWAP and JASDJ both predominantly remained in Borno and its borderlands until ISWAP's next southward expansion in 2022, roughly a decade after the first JASDJ expansion to central Nigeria.

The Nigerian army, starting in 2013, attempted several offensives against JASDJ and later ISWAP with the support of neighboring countries, such as Chad, Cameroon, and Niger. None were decisive. While the army recaptured virtually all major towns in Borno and surrounding areas, where aid organizations and internally displaced persons (IDPs) could find refuge, ISWAP and, to a lesser extent, JASDJ, held onto rural areas and ambushed the army when it ventured into those areas. The Nigerian army lacked enough troops and had too limited intelligence reporting to venture out of the fortified urban areas without risking ISWAP or JASDJ fighters detecting their movements and conducting often devastatingly brutal surprise attacks.

Five years after IS ejected Shekau from ISWAP in August 2016, ISWAP launched an offensive which eventually led to Shekau detonating a suicide bomb to avoid capture in 2021.¹⁵ During the period after Shekau's ejection from ISWAP, the group became comparatively more lenient to the civilian population. This relative leniency, combined with threats of force primarily only against civilians who collaborated with the army, resulted in greater civilian "tolerance" of ISWAP rule in rural areas and enabled ISWAP to consolidate its territorial holdings in northeastern Nigeria. Shekau's death also enabled ISWAP to win defectors from JASDJ, including those who

had been deployed to northwestern Nigeria to ally with bandits. ISWAP, not bogged down by fratricidal conflict with Shekau's faction after 2021 and newly incorporating former Shekau loyalists, proved capable of focusing resources, time, and energies on infiltrating into southern Nigeria in 2022.

Southward Bound: ISWAP's Attacks in Central and Southern Nigeria (2022-Present)

ISWAP was by 2022 the most active group in terms of operations and propaganda of all IS "provinces." The group's rise was predominantly in Borno, but indications emerged in May and October 2019 that the group was planning an expansion towards the south. This occurred when the governments of the coastal Edo and Ondo states respectively reported they broke up ISWAP cells plotting attacks in those two states.¹⁶

ISWAP operations in southern Nigeria would commence three years later in 2022 with the following ISWAP attacks:

- On 20 April 2022, ISWAP claimed responsibility for a bombing one day earlier that killed seven people at a bar connected to the home of a community leader in Taraba State, which is in the southern half of Nigeria along the eastern border with Cameroon. Taraba, like Kogi, is often politically affiliated with the majority Muslim north due to the large Muslim population in the north of the state. Taraba had never been attacked by ISWAP.¹⁷
- On 23 April 2022, ISWAP claimed responsibility for a bombing at another bar in the Taraba State capital, Jalingo, that injured several people. This demonstrated that the previous bombing in the state was not a one-off event, suggesting ISWAP had a strategic objective in expanding southwards.¹⁸
- On 23 April 2022, ISWAP also released a photograph of weapons it claimed to have captured after it attacked a police station in Kogi State.¹⁹
- On 11 May 2022, ISWAP claimed it bombed a bar in Kabba, Kogi State and killed three customers and injured others.²⁰
- On 31 May 2022, ISWAP again claimed a bombing in Kabbi, which injured several customers.²¹
- On 4 June 2022, ISWAP claimed it injured 20 people by bombing a masquerade festival in Okene, Kogi State, which the group considers apostasy.²²
- On 5 June 2022, a massacre was carried out by militants who detonated explosives and then launched a barrage of gunfire during a Catholic mass in Ondo State. This was carried out by ISWAP, according to the Nigerian government, and matched ISWAP's capabilities insofar as it was a well-coordinated, multi-fighter armed assault. It also revealed the potential presence, capabilities, and organization that ISWAP could garner in the south. ISWAP did not claim this attack possibly because it was too brutal or provocative or, perhaps less likely, some other unknown militants orchestrated the attack.²³
- On 6 July 2022, ISWAP claimed responsibility for an attack on Kuje Prison in Abuja, central Nigeria, which freed several hundred inmates, including dozens of ISWAP members. There were suspicions Ansaru may have been involved given that it had begun operating and claiming several sporadic attacks near Abuja in recent months. In addition, some Ansaru members had re-integrated in ISWAP both before, and especially after, Shekau was ejected from the group and then killed during the ISWAP offensive in 2021.²⁴
- On 31 July 2022, ISWAP claimed an attack on soldiers manning a checkpoint near the Zuma Rock landmark outside of Abuja.²⁵
- On 21 September 2022, ISWAP claimed a machine gun ambush attack on a Nigerian police vehicle in Ondo State.²⁶
- On 24 September 2022, ISWAP claimed it

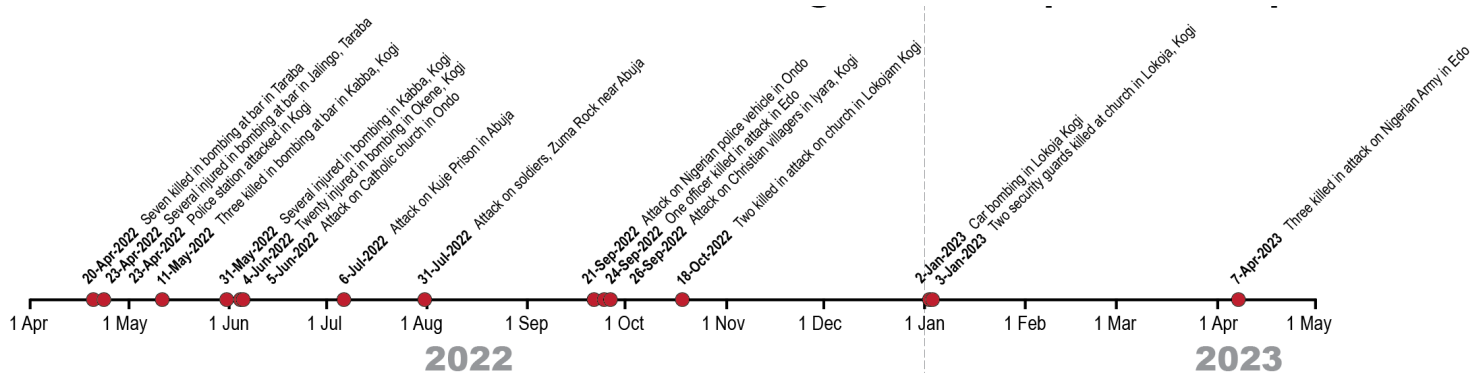
attacked a police checkpoint in Edo State. The state government acknowledged there was an ambush on policemen that resulted in the death of an officer and loss of a vehicle that was stolen by ISWAP.²⁷

- On 26 September 2022, ISWAP claimed it attacked Christian villagers in Iyara, Kogi State and burned down a church and looted villagers' property.²⁸
- On 18 October 2022, ISWAP again claimed it attacked a church in Lokoja, Kogi State and killed two people.²⁹
- On 2 January 2023, ISWAP claimed responsibility for a car bombing in Lokoja, Kogi State, which exploded just before President Buhari's

visit to an emir's palace in the state. The attack was justified by ISWAP as an attack on Buhari himself. The explosion, however, was premature by 30 minutes and killed four people near the emir's palace, but missed Buhari, who was attending the inauguration of a nearby hospital.³⁰

- On 3 January 2023, one day after the assassination attempt on Buhari, ISWAP claimed the shooting and killing of two security guards at a church in Lokoja, Kogi State.³¹
- On 7 April 2023, ISWAP claimed it attacked a checkpoint of the Nigerian army in Edo. ISWAP militants sprayed the soldiers with machine gunfire, killing three soldiers and injuring four others.³²

Timeline of ISWAP Attacks in Southern Nigeria from April 2022 - April 2023



ISWAP's expansion into southern Nigeria was also accompanied by other efforts of the group to break out its northeastern Nigeria bases. Besides these 16 attacks in the south, for example, ISWAP showed itself capable of attacking in parts of the north outside its normal areas of operations. On 25 September 2022, for example, ISWAP claimed it killed a Nigerian army "spy" in Kano.³³ This demonstrated ISWAP's ability to infiltrate cities outside its core areas in northeastern Nigeria and neutralize security officials or informants who might deter ISWAP's expansion. More than half a year after the Kano attack, on 14 April 2023, ISWAP conducted a bombing that it claimed killed three people in Jigawa State, which is in the northeast. Kano had not been targeted by ISWAP from 2015

until 2022 and Jigawa had never been attacked by ISWAP or JASDJ, despite ISWAP attacking all other states in northern Nigeria. This attack in Jigawa, when assessed in view of the Kano attack and other attacks in southern Nigeria, also represented ISWAP expansion, albeit not in the south, and a strategy to venture out of Borno and its borderlands while still consolidating territorial control there.³⁴

ISWAP's operations into southern Nigeria and elsewhere outside of its main base in northeastern Nigeria were nevertheless little discussed in the media or academia, or even in Nigerian military statements despite ISWAP's expansion into the region for the first time in the insurgency's history.

This may have been because the group did not carry out attacks on international targets, such as on major hotels or multinational corporations, which would have attracted greater attention. ISWAP's operations demonstrated the group has hideouts, tactical sophistication, and recruiting power in the south, but the purposes of the expansion to the south may not have been intended to garner widespread international attention or news coverage. Such attention could backfire against ISWAP by encouraging increased counterterrorism pressure against ISWAP in its core territorial holdings in the northeast, which would upset its governance project. In contrast, a "Goldilocks" level of violence, which did not provoke a regional or international counter-ISWAP offensive, but still showed ISWAP's capability to expand and divert Nigerian army resources, might have been the preferred strategy for ISWAP.

IMPLICATIONS

These 16 ISWAP attacks detailed above between April 2022 and April 2023 were all in a region where the group had not previously operated, representing a trend whereby ISWAP expanded its areas of operations. Three reasons for why ISWAP may have begun to conduct attacks in southern Nigeria might include:

- **Outbidding Other Jihadist Groups:** ISWAP's expansion may have resulted from the group's desire to show that it was the only bona fide "Nigerian" jihadist group, compared to JASDJ and Ansaru, by operating throughout the whole of the country's territory. ISWAP's offensive led to Shekau's death in August 2021 and many JASDJ members in northeastern Nigeria either defected to ISWAP or surrendered to the Nigerian army's "Safe Corridor" deradicalization program. However, ISWAP still was clashing with some remaining Shekau loyalists who continued in JASDJ after Shekau's death. Ansaru, significantly smaller than ISWAP and JASDJ, maintained only a small presence out
- **Directives From IS Core:** By 2022, IS "core" in Iraq and Syria was thoroughly routed from the territories it held in those two countries and facing a geopolitical context where the United States and its Kurdish partners, the Iraqi government, the Syrian regime and allied proxies, Turkey, and hostile civilian populations were all preventing its resurgence. In contrast, the Nigerian army had largely abandoned its attempts to rout ISWAP from the rural areas in Borno State and its borderlands that ISWAP controlled. With this "breathing room" to plot attacks, IS may have advised ISWAP to conduct attacks, such as those on Christians or police in southern Nigeria, that would show IS supporters that the organization was still "remaining (*baqiya*)" in the IS heartland in the Middle East, while also still "expanding (*tattamadud*)" elsewhere in the world, such as in southern Nigeria, albeit without "provoking" international interventions by not attacking foreign personnel in the south. Attacking Christians in southern Nigeria similarly could also incite retaliatory violence against Muslims, which ISWAP—and IS—could use to further their narratives and recruitment as well.
- **Drawing the Nigerian Army Away From the North:** While ISWAP's control of its territories in northeastern Nigeria was relatively secure, the Nigerian army still had taken control of the main towns in Borno State and had consistently defended those towns since 2019. By conducting attacks in states that previously had not been attacked, ISWAP may have been attempting to force the Nigerian army to become more dispersed and lighten the pressure on ISWAP in Borno State, or at least on the army's defenses of the main towns there. This could allow ISWAP to initiate a new

offensive against the main towns in Borno State that would be less defended because of the army's dispersal to prevent ISWAP attacks in the south.

ISWAP's operations in states where it had previously not operated or had almost no prior attacks was a new development that emerged in 2022. This expansion has not received significant attention as most of the concern in Nigeria remains on the group's territorial holdings in northeastern Nigeria and the ramifications of the infighting with JASDJ and Ansaru or the defections from the latter two to ISWAP. Nevertheless, ISWAP's geographic expansion since April 2022 may represent only the tip of the iceberg, and ISWAP almost certainly will continue to activate or reactivate cells in southern Nigeria or other "new" states for operations when it finds a strategic opportunity.

The lack of ISWAP attacks in southern Nigeria from April 2023 until the end of the year could indicate that the group utilized all its resources in the region and has not since redeployed new

fighters there. Alternatively, it is possible that the group succeeded insofar as the Nigerian security forces diverted sufficient attention to the south that counterterrorism pressure eased on ISWAP in the northeast. It remains to be seen whether the ISWAP expansion to the south will become "only" a one-year stint in that region or whether ISWAP will recommence attacks there through redeploying militants there and, if so, whether their target selection will differ from the initial phase of expansion into the region.

Nevertheless, the fact that southern Nigeria is home to the country's majority Christian population and possesses Nigeria's crucial oil reserves makes preparing to counter any renewed ISWAP attacks there of key importance. Opportunities exist to analyze ISWAP's operational patterns and coordinate an international response. Soliciting input from Nigerian civil society, which can engage in counter-radicalization efforts, may also help prevent recruitment of southern Nigerians to ISWAP.

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