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Competitive Control? ‘Hearts and Minds’ and the Population Control Strategy of the Islamic State West Africa Province

Edward Stoddard ^{a,b}

^aCentre for European and International Studies Research (CEISR), University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK; ^bEmerging Research in International Security (ERIS) Group, Istituto DIRPOLIS (Diritto, Politica e Sviluppo), Scuola Superiore Sant’Anna, Pisa, Italy

ABSTRACT

Aiming to win “hearts and minds,” the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) is widely thought to have been less violent toward civilians than the original “Boko Haram.” This article employs the underutilized notion of “competitive control” to explore the strategy underpinning this approach. In doing so, it examines the logic of ISWAP’s strategy of population control, in particular its efforts to capture the population through the establishment of a predictable system of order. Ultimately, this article demonstrates how ISWAP’s “hearts and minds” approach (and its violent limits) have supported the group’s economic/military strategy in a competitive eco-system of violence.

Keywords

ISWAP; Islamic State West Africa Province; Competitive Control; Populations; Nigeria

Introduction

The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) broke away from the “Boko Haram” group (*Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad* - JASDJ) in 2016.¹ Despite starting out smaller than JASDJ, ISWAP has grown to be one of the most potent armed groups in sub-Saharan Africa.² The extent of its capabilities was felt from autumn 2018 when the group launched a campaign against the Nigerian military in the northern part of Borno State, near Lake Chad. During the end of 2018 and beginning of 2019 the group maintained a sustained series of offensives against army bases, overrunning several and significantly boosting its arsenal through the capture of military equipment.³ The group has maintained a high tempo of attacks since: killing, for example, as many as 100 soldiers in an ambush near the Alagarano Forest in Borno state in March 2020 and overrunning a Nigerian Army base in the neighboring Diffa region of Niger in May 2020.⁴ In early 2021 they had a string of successes against Nigerian “Supercamps” (initially thought to be too strong for ISWAP to take).⁵ Perhaps most notably, ISWAP ousted JASDJ from its stronghold in

CONTACT Edward Stoddard  Ed.stoddard@port.ac.uk  Centre for European and International Studies Research, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK

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the Sambisa Forest in May 2021 and the leader of JASDJ, Abubakar Shekau reportedly killed himself during surrender negotiations with ISWAP.⁶ While some parts of JASDJ remain active, many of ISWAP's enemies in JASDJ have either joined the group, given themselves up to the government or have been killed. More recently (July 2022), ISWAP launched a series of attacks further south in Nigeria, including a major and audacious prison break in Kuje, 20 km from the capital, Abuja.⁷

However, alongside this growth in military capability, ISWAP has also (relative to JASDJ) had a different approach toward civilians. While JASDJ engaged in widespread attacks on civilians and committed widespread atrocities, ISWAP has been (relatively) less violent toward Muslim civilians (with important exceptions – see below). The Global Terrorism Database (GTD⁸ – which codes differently for JASDJ and ISWAP up to mid-2021) records “Boko Haram” groups as killing 14,319 people in attacks against “private citizens and property.” Of these 13,667 were killed by JASDJ⁹ compared with 652 for ISWAP. JASDJ predates post-split ISWAP of course so absolute numbers present a skewed picture. A more useful metric is the mean number of killed per year of operations: circa 1139 per year for JASDJ (mid-2009 – mid 2021) compared with just over 130 per year for ISWAP (post-split mid-2016 to mid 2021). When one considers that ISWAP was able to overrun Nigerian Army bases from 2018, one can see that they could have killed far more civilians if they had wanted to. An additional useful metric is to compare the proportions of attacks aimed at different targets. Up to mid-2021, JASDJ attacked military and police targets in 22.9% of its attacks, compared with 50.2% of its attacks aimed at private citizens and their property. By contrast, up to mid-2021, ISWAP attacked military and police targets in 61.4% of its attacks compared with 27.4% of attacks targeted at private citizens and their property. These quantitative differences are backed up by numerous scholars and journalists have done excellent work documenting ISWAP's “hearts and minds” approach toward the civilian population in the Lake Chad area, highlighting how the group has sought to win populations round to its cause and engage in the provision of services.¹⁰ This work is consistent with analysis documenting the ideological underpinnings of the split within Boko Haram and role that ISWAP leaders' aversion to attacks on civilians played in the breakup of the group.¹¹

While analysts are certainly correct in their assessment of ISWAP's shifted direction compared with JASDJ, a focus on winning “hearts and minds” only captures a part of ISWAP's practice toward the population and doesn't easily account for continued instances of violence against civilians. This paper seeks to explain the adoption of this “hearts and minds approach” *strategically* by understanding its role in ISWAP's approach to population control and the role of this activity in the group's wider military and politico-economic insurgent activity. It focuses largely on the period of ISWAP's rise, approximately until

early/mid-2021 when ISWAP took over most of JASDJ.¹² Doing so not only helps to explore the strategic rationale of this “hearts and minds” approach, but also, crucially, to set out its limits. That is to say, understanding why ISWAP has engaged in this “hearts and minds” approach, also helps us understand why they sometimes switch to much more violent forms of interaction with civilians.

While there is a broad and fascinating literature on the “Boko Haram” phenomenon,¹³ ISWAP – as a newer group – has received less specific academic attention¹⁴ and the population control *strategies* of ISWAP as an insurgency are relatively understudied in the academic literature. While this paper accepts that there are some aspects, particularly ideological aspects, that are largely unique to jihadist groups, it subscribes to the view that most jihadist groups, in Africa as elsewhere, are also *revolutionary insurgencies*¹⁵ and that a lot can be learned about their activity through the careful use of concepts/frameworks derived originally from other (non-jihadist) revolutionary insurgencies. Seeing these groups as such, helps to avoid essentializing or reifying jihadist insurgencies¹⁶ (or African insurgencies for that matter¹⁷) and opens up discussion with literatures and findings on insurgencies elsewhere (see below).

In order to offer a specific focus on ISWAP’s population strategy, this article employs the concept of “competitive control,” originally outlined by Fall in 1965 in the context of the Vietnam War, but developed most recently by Kilcullen in relation to conflicts in Afghanistan, Lebanon and Iraq.¹⁸ “Competitive control systems,” as defined by Kilcullen, are normative systems of governance that establish “full-spectrum control over violence, economic activity and human security.”¹⁹ Kilcullen argues that, in conflict, populations “respond to a predictable, ordered normative system that tells them what to do, and what not to do, to stay safe.”²⁰ This article will argue that this framework presents an effective way of understanding the strategic underpinnings of ISWAP’s “hearts and minds” approach, locating this seemingly more “pro-population” activity in its strategy for population control and insurgency escalation. Up to now, this framework has not been applied to ISWAP or the context of the “Boko Haram” conflict more broadly.²¹

As will be explored in more depth below, there are several useful features of Kilcullen’s “competitive control” concept that help to place the “hearts and minds” approach within its wider strategic context. Firstly, the concept is *dualistic and dialectic* drawing attention to the fact that insurgency in Northeast Nigeria is an armed “competition for governance” in which all sides seek to exploit the weaknesses and mistakes of their opponents.²² ISWAP’s “hearts and minds” offering has been carefully calibrated to compete effectively with JASDJ and that of the Nigerian state. Secondly, the concept is *functional* rather than structural, allowing one to assess structurally distinct, but functionally similar (to states) attempts to penetrate and control society

and extract resources by ISWAP.²³ Third, this conceptualization helps us to go beyond the normative content of ISWAP's "hearts and minds" approach in order to understand the importance of *security* and *predictability* as a basis for the group's offering.²⁴ A factor particularly important in the context of high levels of physical and economic insecurity and uncertainty in North East Nigeria. Finally, the concept highlights the *trap-like* quality of seemingly more benign "hearts and minds" approach.²⁵ In the context of Northeast Nigeria there are low barriers to joining ISWAP's "*dawla*" (state). However, while competitive control systems can be easy to enter, they can be difficult (and dangerous) to leave.

Based on a mixed-methods approach, using open-source online data and in-depth interviews in Abuja, London and via Zoom, this article explores the functioning of ISWAP's competitive control system. Specifically, it demonstrates how this ISWAP mode of control competes in the ecosystem of contested governance in Northeast Nigeria, how it sets up a functional model of control that serves principally to extract resources in a sustainable fashion and how it traps the population into this system of control through a model that offers relative security and predictability, but carries costs for those that challenge the group. While the "hearts and minds" character of ISWAP's approach underpins all of these different tactical features of its control system strategy, it supports a violent and coercive control structure.

Beyond its focus on ISWAP, this article also contributes to a wider literature on "rebel governance" and the more nascent literature on "jihadi governance" in Africa.²⁶ While, as Rupesinghe, Naghizadeh and Cohen have noted, the literature on African jihadi governance is very much in its early stages,²⁷ some excellent scholarship has explored the forms of jihadist governance in Africa, the role of ideology, and the links between local-political and global-ideological drivers of governance practices.²⁸ The focus on "competitive control" complements this work well by exploring the military-strategic logics that contribute to the character of governance activity. More broadly, this research speaks to a number of key themes in the wider literature on "rebel governance," in particular the relationship between rebel governance, insurgent control and violence toward civilians. Indeed, discussions below on the *limits* of ISWAP's "hearts and minds" approach support the recent work of Welsh²⁹ who (with a case study on "Boko Haram" [but not ISWAP]) has highlighted how insurgents tend to target civilians in areas where they face greater competition for the allegiance of civilians. Similarly, Rubin³⁰ argues that in areas of competition with states, civilians are likely to be less content with rebel forms of governance, putting them at odds with insurgent groups. As will be described below, in cases where civilians are seen to side with ISWAP's opponents, especially when this threatens their competitive control model, ISWAP can be incredibly violent. Similarly, Breslawski³¹ has demonstrated how insurgents tend to eschew violence toward civilians seen as their

“constituency.” A notable point considering JASDJ has had a more restrictive approach to its “constituency” than ISWAP. ISWAP’s focus on resource extraction (discussed below) speaks to the research by Conrad, Reyes and Stewart,³² who have found strong evidence of insurgents providing health governance in areas where they rely on the population for resource extraction. Furthermore, while earlier studies in rebel governance assumed territorial control as a precondition of rebel governance, more recent scholarship has relaxed this assumption.³³ This article speaks directly to this newer literature as it explores ISWAP’s efforts to control *populations* rather than territory *per se* in contested geographical areas. This research thus offers a qualitative in-depth study that speaks to some of the key themes in the, largely quantitative, rebel governance literature.

The article is divided into four sections. The first outlines the conceptualization of “competitive control” as described by Fall and Kilcullen and sets out the framework of analysis. The second highlights the methods employed. The third discusses ISWAP’s competitive control system itself and its dualistic, functionally extractive, security and predictability-producing, and “trap-like” qualities. The final section concludes.

The concept of competitive control

The concept of “competitive control” was first introduced by Fall in 1965 to describe subversion in the Vietnam War.³⁴ Fall was particularly interested in the relationship between insurgents and the population in revolutionary war.³⁵ He argued that proponents of revolutionary warfare use force not to defeat state forces (at least not initially) but rather to “establish a competitive system of control over the population.” For Fall, establishing such a system implied being prepared to kill both the enemy and those among one’s target population who would collaborate with the enemy. However, he stressed that killing was a “secondary” issue. Within a revolutionary war, for Fall, the “the political, ideological and administrative aspect is the primary aspect.”³⁶ Consequently, he argued that “when a country is being subverted it is not being outfought, it is being *out-administered*” [emphasis in original].³⁷ Fall’s observations are consistent with those made by Taber in his classic account of Maoist-style revolutionary warfare “The War of the Flea.”³⁸ Like Fall, Taber argued that revolutionary-insurgent warfare was first and foremost about “engaging a civilian population, or a significant part of that population against the military forces of established [...] governmental authority.”³⁹ This is principally because insurgents are usually at a material disadvantage vis-à-vis states and need to engage the population to make up this deficit. Populations provide fighters, resources (food, money etc.) and intelligence and are central to the survival and growth of most insurgencies. Control systems are therefore, from this point of view, a way of understanding how insurgents can come to control

a population and then use this control to extract benefits and resources to pursue the insurgency.

Kilcullen: conceptualizing competitive control

While Fall outlined the conceptual core of competitive control before his death,⁴⁰ the idea has been developed most notably by David Kilcullen in two more recent books - *Counterinsurgency* (published 2010) and *Out of the Mountains* (published 2014).⁴¹ Kilcullen's objective was to establish a more rigorous conceptualization of competitive control and the role that competitive control plays in warfare.

Kilcullen argues that competitive control systems “apply a range of capabilities across a spectrum from persuasion, through administration to coercion, and they are designed by armed actors – owners or proponents of the system – as a means to corral, control, manipulate, and mobilize populations.”⁴² Such systems compete, as a form of *armed governance*, typically between non-state armed groups and states (although potentially between non-state armed groups). Kilcullen directs most of the analysis in both books to the conceptualization of a system of competitive control, addressing the core features of such a system and how they work to establish population control. There are a number of particularly useful features of the concept of competitive control, as described by Kilcullen, that help to place the “pro-population,” “hearts and minds” approach of ISWAP within its wider strategic context. These are now discussed in turn.

Core features of the competitive control concept

Firstly, the *dialectic* and *dualistic* qualities of the concept are among its core strengths. Fall and Kilcullen both highlight the duality of insurgent-counterinsurgent violence showing how it revolves around contested normative systems of governance where both sides build their system on the military and political mistakes and weaknesses of their opponents.⁴³ As Kilcullen notes, this leads us to understand and compare the “initial attractiveness of each option and the strength of the incentive spectrum that locks the population in once the choice is made.”⁴⁴ ISWAP's more “hearts and minds-based” competitive control approach should thus be assessed in terms of its capacity to have established a form of comparative advantage vis-a-vis both the far more violent JASDJ group, and the Nigerian state.

Secondly, the concept is *functional rather than structural*, drawing attention to what these systems of control are *designed to do* rather than whether the structure of the ISWAP “state” resembles that of a conventional state (or another group).⁴⁵ This helps to understand the competing forms of governance offered by structurally very different actors who are trying to achieve

functionally similar goals: to penetrate society, regulate behavior and extract resources for group ends.⁴⁶ Indeed as noted in the discussion of Fall and Taber's work above, using (often coercive) engagement with the population to develop and gain resources is one of the core goals of most insurgencies and a core point of competition with states who – at least in part – seek to do the same thing. Seeing this in functional terms allows a more realistic assessment of a group's influence over a population than traditional state-based metrics such as territorial control which do not necessarily apply to non-state actors in the same way.⁴⁷

Third, and crucial, is how the concept of competitive control moves beyond a focus on the popularity of normative content (although this is by no means irrelevant) to argue that *predictability, stability and security* (in terms security from violence, economic hardship and threats to physical integrity) are the driving force behind a successful and resilient control system.⁴⁸ Competitive control systems outline for populations “what they need to do, and not do, in order to be safe” even if often it is the group itself that would harm civilians if they did not follow its conditions.⁴⁹ In conflict-zones this is very powerful and may lead those who would not otherwise support the group to do so. Here Kilcullen draws on Kalyvas's observation that in civil wars, rebels do not become strong in the areas where they are initially supported, but often end up supported most where they become strongest.⁵⁰ When a group is strong this gives the greatest incentive to civilians to obey rules and, crucially, also a greater benefit from doing so. This also concurs with much of the recent rebel governance literature discussed above. Security is fundamental as it offers a basis for all other social activity (including the wider normative structure itself) and thus offers a form of predictability that humans crave in turbulent situations.⁵¹ Predictability does not solely refer to physical threats of being caught in armed violence but also to the predictability of the economic situation (are there employment opportunities, are there adequate resources for the population, are their opportunities for exchange, are property rights respected? etc.) and predictability in terms of risks to personal safety (will one be attacked, or a victim of state abuse, subject to corrupt officials and/or gender-based violence? etc). Kilcullen notes that “predictability is the basis for [...] social stability – something that is deeply attractive to a population buffeted by decades of instability and desperately worried about the future.”⁵² In many cases a militant group's normative offering is accepted *as the price* for relative predictability, stability and security rather than because it is favored.⁵³ This underpins the decision of many in North-east Nigeria to stay within ISWAP territories even when they don't have to and don't necessarily support the group's ideological aims.

Finally, the concept draws attention to the “*trap-like*” quality of a seemingly more benign “hearts and minds” approach, and thus its limits. Accepting the authority of the system, in conditions of uncertainty and chaos, is an attractive

option – even for those who do not like the ideology of the insurgents. Kilcullen notes that, “like real fish traps, these metaphorical fish traps are woven of many strands – persuasive, administrative and coercive.”⁵⁴ He states that “whoever does better at establishing a resilient system of control that gives people order and a sense of security where they sleep is likely to gain their support and ultimately win the competition for government.”⁵⁵ A core point here is that competitive control systems that combine a “wide spectrum of control” using persuasive, administrative and coercive strands are likely to be more effective than those that rely on a “narrow spectrum” of only one or two strands.⁵⁶ He tests this in the cases of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the Taliban and Hezbollah noting that the latter two offer a more comprehensive competitive control structure that have proven more resilient than the purely coercive approach of AQI.⁵⁷ Once an individual has engaged with a competitive control system, these different strands make it hard to leave. Insurgents may use violent coercion of course but individuals may be advantaged by the system. If one benefits from a legal ruling of an insurgent court for example, one becomes invested in the success of the insurgents as the ruling only holds as long as they are in power.⁵⁸ States themselves can also make it very difficult to reengage with government authorities, especially when any association with the militants may be treated very severely by the state’s forces. All of these may apply at the same time. As such, competitive control systems may seem like they are in a population’s best interests (and it is not impossible that they are in a very immediate sense), but Kilcullen demonstrates how the short term benefits they offer lock civilians into insurgent control.⁵⁹ As will be shown, ISWAP makes it easy to join, or at least tacitly accept, their *dawla* (“state”), but in the context of the war in North East Nigeria it is difficult to leave and extremely dangerous to resist.

Strategy and ideology in ISWAP’s competitive control model

While this article does not set out to specifically assess the ideological sources of ISWAP’s action some discussion of ideology and links with the wider “Islamic State” group are helpful here. The focus on ISWAP’s *strategic* approach described above is not meant to contradict scholarly works that have explored the ideological underpinnings of ISWAP’s views on targeting civilians (a well-documented cause of the split with JASDJ).⁶⁰ Indeed, the position adopted here does not see strategy and ideology as being in tension, but rather views ISWAP’s insurgent practice (like other jihadist groups) as being derived from an interweaving of both ideological and strategic strands of thinking. Dividing lines on who is an “apostate” and thus a permissible target have existed for a long time within “Boko Haram” and they predate the initial establishment of ISWAP or the split in 2016.⁶¹ Indeed, such debates exist across the wider jihadist movement, including *within* the “Islamic State” which

has been, at times, inconsistent on this point having gone through its own highly contentious debates on this issue.⁶²

Jihadist scholars have long-debated both the theological and strategic justifications for their actions and ISWAP's leaders criticized Shekau for both ideological and strategic failings, even suggesting that strategic misfortunes were caused by deviations from "correct" ideological (in their view *religious*) practice, and that correction of these "religious" mistakes might yield strategic success.⁶³ Indeed, strategic choices are often presented in doctrinal terms by jihadists: After attacking Shekau and bringing about his death, ISWAP (via the "IS" newsletter *al-Naba*) criticized him for driving his group to "the abyss" with decisions that weakened his soldiers, emptied "the areas of his control" of farmers, and raised the "specter of hunger and famine."⁶⁴ They framed these mistakes however as deriving from (religious) "innovation" and deviating from their (ISWAP and IS's) interpretation of Islamic rules.⁶⁵ These latter descriptions, reflecting long-stated criticisms of Shekau, have been promoted by IS centrally via *al Naba*, meaning they must agree with them. This however is probably better understood as a convergence of viewpoints rather than a direct import from IS to ISWAP *per se* given how long these views have been held by dissident, and later ISWAP, voices in the wider "Boko Haram" movement. Indeed, Foucher has noted how ISWAP sought out rulings from ISWAP on issues that were already contentious in the group.⁶⁶

Scholars have, however, observed in a number of contexts how jihadists engage in cost-benefit strategic thinking alongside ideology in planning operations.⁶⁷ It is thus crucial to note in this context that the ideological position adopted by ISWAP toward civilians does not *predetermine* the competitive control strategy described here. Indeed, ISWAP could have largely *ignored* Muslim civilians and still been broadly consistent with its more restrictive approach toward civilian targeting. The fact that it has built this complex web of "competitive control," demonstrates a level of strategic thinking sitting alongside its ideological justifications and shares more with Islamic State's very practical "*manhaj*" or method for building a "state" and developing economic resources.⁶⁸ Foucher indeed notes how IS is thought to have provided ISWAP with guidance on these issues.⁶⁹ Furthermore, while IS and its affiliates claim this *manhaj* is based on prophetic practice, it is important to note however that this "competitive control" strategic approach shares many similarities with other non-jihadist insurgencies elsewhere. As Whiteside,⁷⁰ Kalyvas,⁷¹ Stewart,⁷² Ingram,⁷³ and Stoddard⁷⁴ have all noted, revolutionary jihadists have adopted strategic positions that mirror closely elements of other non-jihadist revolutionary groups, even if these are shaped by jihadist ideology and rhetoric in their application. On these points ISWAP is likely to have been influenced by IS given the timings of the split (2016) and ISWAP's development of its competitive control practice after that.⁷⁵ ISWAP's approach nevertheless mirrors in some ways that of the main "Islamic State" group and may

well be influenced by IS as both group claim.⁷⁶ However, it is very important to note that ISWAP shares these strategic characteristics with “IS-central” on an axis of “IS” insurgent practice that both groups share with other non-jihadist revolutionary groups.⁷⁷ Therefore, a particular advantage of using this competitive control framework (which is “ideology-agnostic” and applied in the past to multiple ideologically distinct groups) is that it helps to highlight and de-essentialize the strategic nature of ISWAP’s interactions with civilians, *without* negating the role ideology has played in pushing ISWAP down this path and shaping its practice.

Methodology

The rest of the article uses the core features of the conceptual model described above (please see Table 1) to explore the character of ISWAP’s population control strategies and the role of its “hearts and minds” approach therein. This article effectively uses the model described by Kilcullen as an “ideal type” and then employs it to explore and better understand the population control strategies of ISWAP. Kilcullen’s model is essentially a composite ideal type based on his numerous direct experiences of conflict and academic research in a series of contexts (it appears to be *most* influenced by the Taliban and Hezbollah models of competitive control as two very successful insurgent groups who use the “full spectrum” of control measures). The aim is therefore to assess the strategic character of ISWAP’s actions and the role that its seemingly more hearts and minds-based approach plays in this strategy.

The data for this research comes principally from two sources. Firstly, a series of 18 in-depth interviews in Abuja, Nigeria (13 interviews), in London, UK (2) and via Zoom to Nigeria (3) with Nigerian former military officials, Western diplomatic, security and development officials, think tank experts, academic researchers and journalist experts. These interviews were gained via a snowballing approach with initial interviews secured through existing contacts, used to gain further interviews. The criteria for the inclusion

Table 1. Operationalization of Kilcullen’s ideal type “competitive control” framework.

Feature	Examples of observable behaviour
<i>Dialectic and dualistic</i>	Clear desire to distinguish themselves from competitors. Seek to compete both violently and in terms of governance offer with other actors.
<i>Functional rather than structural</i>	Mirroring state functions, but not necessarily state forms. Extracting resources from a society a key function.
<i>Predictability, stability and security</i>	Insurgents do not eschew violence <i>per se</i> but offer a predictable set of rules on how to get by as a civilian. Provide some physical and economic security (at least in a proximate sense – may decrease it in the long-run).
<i>Trap-like</i>	Rules and governance offered is attractive, but impossible to leave or reject. Extreme punishments for those that contravene key rules.

of interviewees from among those recommended was expertise on the topic matter. Care was taken however to gain a range of interviews with interlocutors from the different fields mentioned above. Most of these interviews were with Nigerian interviewees. Interviews themselves were semi-structured in nature with a range of set questions, but the space to allow the conversation around these questions to evolve in line with the expertise of the interviewee. The second source of data is “open source” materials including Nigerian and international journalistic accounts, think tank reports and academic literature.⁷⁸ Data analysis is based on a simple qualitative content analysis of these sources with a coding system based on the four core themes described above. This approach allows one to piece together different sources of information into a more comprehensive account of the different aspects of ISWAP’s competitive control aiming to triangulate between different data sources.⁷⁹

‘Hearts and minds’ in ISWAP’s competitive control system

The remainder of the article outlines the core features of ISWAP’s competitive control model. The first subsection below sets out the *dualistic and dialectical* nature of armed contested governance in Northeast Nigeria showing how ISWAP has sought to carve out a niche for itself by pursuing a more population-focused approach than JASDJ and, to an extent, the Nigerian military. Discussed next are the core *functions* of this approach – to penetrate society to extract resources. This section highlights how ISWAP’s less exploitative model allows it to take advantage of the mistakes of its opponents and create a more sustainable economic foundation. The article then highlights the core role *security and predictability* play as the core of ISWAP’s model of competitive control and finally examines the “*trap-like*” qualities of this system.

Entering a dualistic and dialectic conflict ecosystem

The nature of ISWAP’s split from JASDJ in 2016 meant that, from its inception, the group was competing with, and needing to define itself against, two other entities within the same conflict space. Firstly, the group continued to reject the Nigerian state and the establishment of ISWAP saw no move toward reconciliation. Indeed, the ISWAP leadership killed the senior ISWAP, and former JASDJ commander, Mamman Nur in 2018 in part because he was thought to have opened back channel talks with the Government.⁸⁰ Likewise the commander Ali Gaga was also killed later in 2018 before he was reportedly due to give himself up.⁸¹ The leadership since has remained implacably opposed to the Nigerian state (although back channels do exist) and, indeed, the group has (unlike the Shekau-led JASDJ) made the military its core target.

Secondly, in 2016 ISWAP also had to define itself against its former “parent” organization JASDJ. The split between these two groups was acrimonious and violent, with ISWAP then-leader Abu Musab al Barnawi denouncing JASDJ leader Shekau. There are a number of reasons for the split, perhaps first amongst them being Shekau’s record of targeting civilians and his strident and hyper-extreme (even within jihadist circles) position on *takfir* or excommunication. The question of (Muslim) civilian targeting has been a point of serious contention within Boko Haram for many years with the group Ansaru (that split from Boko Haram in 2012) also opposing civilian attacks.⁸² Shekau held the position that those who do not actively join his group are apostates and thus legitimate targets. He came therefore to draw his “constituency” very narrowly.⁸³ The ISWAP leadership disagrees with this position in part for theological reasons, but as will be discussed below, limiting its targeting of civilians (at least compared to JASDJ) offers strategic benefits as well.

While both JASDJ and the Nigerian state recognized the importance of the population as a *resource* for JASDJ, between the establishment of JASDJ in 2009/10 and the split in 2016 neither had prioritized building up a positive relationship with the population. JASDJ recruited (sometimes forcibly) from local populations and – through predation – relied on them for resources. Indeed, JASDJ has been incredibly brutal toward many of the civilians that the group interacted with. It is certainly the case that JASDJ offered much more to those *that joined the group* such as basic services, food and shelter and some individual JASDJ fighters have shown (very relative) leniency to civilians on occasions (for example, helping disabled people to escape during attacks).⁸⁴ For the most part however, the group was incredibly violent, abusive and predatory toward the population. There are a great number of reports of JASDJ massacres in northeast Nigeria.⁸⁵

While it would be wrong to compare JASDJ and the Nigerian military in this regard, the Military’s human rights record is weak. While many brave soldiers have served in the Northeast theater, and there are reports of commanders trying hard to assist the local population, there have also been documented cases of abuses, mass arrests, forced disappearances, detention without trial and torture.⁸⁶ The Nigerian counterinsurgency model has also at times relied on clearances of towns which are designed to sever the link between the population and the militants and to offer communities some protection. However, they have also displaced people to garrison towns and IDP camps where the conditions are often inadequate. The government (along with others in the region) has also shut down markets, trade routes and economic activities for fear of the proceeds reaching “Boko Haram.”⁸⁷ While this (temporarily) restricted economic flows to militants, it also has had a big negative impact on local people’s livelihoods.⁸⁸

As such, ISWAP entered a conflict ecosystem, where there was an advantage to be gained from adopting a different approach to the population. It is likely

that ISWAP leaders at the time, disagreed with the targeting of Muslim civilians in principle. They do, however, also appear to have implemented a control system that exploited a relative advantage in terms of relations with the population for strategic reasons. Before the ISWAP model competed with JASDJ and the Nigerian military in terms of the capacity for organized violence (as it now does), it competed for the “hearts and minds” of civilians.

ISWAP’s core competitive control functions: penetrate society to access resources

As outlined in Kilcullen’s model, the core functional objectives of ISWAP’s competitive control model are to 1) infiltrate society, 2) regulate social behaviors (especially in the local economy) and 3) to use this engagement to extract resources that can be targeted toward furthering the insurgency.⁸⁹ The “hearts and minds approach” assists in all these objectives.

It is only possible to ISWAP to sustain itself if it remains close to the local population, with the local environment being its main source of recruitment and resources (even if there are reports of other fighters coming from other parts of Africa including IS strongholds in Libya – although the latter are more likely offering strategic guidance/training and not present in high numbers).⁹⁰

ISWAP is thought like other insurgencies (Hezbollah given as an example by interviewees) to rely on its link to the population with this relationship being “their oxygen.”⁹¹ ISWAP wants in part to be seen as legitimate by the population for doctrinal reasons and because it wanted to distinguish themselves from JASDJ and Shekau (as above), but also because control over the population – and its economic activities – is a core resource.⁹² ISWAP therefore has a more population-dependent strategy than JASDJ. For JASDJ, the population was treated as an expendable resource from whom assets can be looted. ISWAP sought a more sustainable strategy, seeking to infiltrate society and establish control over economic sectors and then using these to generate revenue, principally through “taxation.”⁹³

ISWAP’s territorial control is transitory, but, as noted above, its control of the population remains the core goal. The group only needs to push the military out of the area for a few days to spread information about the rules of its control system.⁹⁴ It thus takes advantage of gaps in the military’s control of territory to penetrate society and establish its rules, without needing to permanently control the area. The group has learned from the mistakes of both JASDJ and IS in Iraq/Syria on the dangers of trying to hold territory at all costs, especially major urban centers (even if the group is thought to have the capacity to seize towns if it wanted to).⁹⁵ Doing so would take major effort and eventually would likely be repelled by international airstrikes or a boosted Nigerian military presence.⁹⁶ The group considers it better to fight in rural areas pushing the military back into towns and holding sway over the

countryside where it can embed itself in economic matters. In the opinion of one senior former Nigerian military official ISWAP knows that their “utopia” (full territorial control and administration) is not possible, but they are hopeful that a future government will be weaker, reduce the pressure and give them some of what they want.⁹⁷

Representatives from ISWAP travel to towns to disseminate information about the group.⁹⁸ This is often done on market days as it presents a short window where a lot of people can be reached (who then reach others).⁹⁹ An interviewee from Maiduguri described how JASDJ in the early days used to take advantage of the same logic distributing messages locally via tea sellers, spaces that – on a micro level – served the same function.¹⁰⁰ Much of the information spread about the group is done through word of mouth, although ISWAP does propagandize through electronic means (sending messages and the distribution of videos when the internet is available) and the group uses local printers to produce and distribute leaflets to the population.¹⁰¹

One of the major effects of ISWAP’s ability to penetrate society is its ability to control economic activities in its areas of influence. The group has sought to bring core economic sectors in the Lake Chad area under its control – notably the fishing and pepper trades. Fishing and pepper are major economic sectors in and around the Lake. Fish from Lake Chad accounts for around 70% of the fish sold at large markets in southern Nigeria.¹⁰² In 2010 the Lake produced between 50,000 to 100,000 tonnes of fish and up to 900,000 tonnes of corn (much of which was marketed out of the immediate Lake Chad area).¹⁰³ The Lake is a highly productive area whose economic activities are labor intensive and thus offer a source of employment for the wider region.¹⁰⁴ In 2011 an estimated 200,000 people were employed (seasonally) in the fishing trade in the Lake Chad area, fish production was worth about US\$60 million and up to 10 million people were employed in industries dependent on fishing across the Lake Chad Basin states.¹⁰⁵ The Lake is also a major site for the rearing and transportation of cattle.

In the context of the region, this is a major economic resource and the heart of ISWAP’s competitive control strategy has lied in taking advantage of the economic productivity of the Lake Chad region. The group does so in a number of ways. On the one hand the group is itself directly involved in the fishing, agriculture and pepper trades as well as related services (such as transportation and protection) that facilitate these economic activities.¹⁰⁶ GICS report that, in fishing for example, ISWAP had by 2018 reached a position of dominance in the Lake Chad trade with the group present at all stages in the production chain from the fishing itself to distribution.¹⁰⁷ Another principal means through which the group raises finance is through the collection of taxes.¹⁰⁸ For example, the Humangle news agency in Nigeria reported that fishermen pay Naira (N)15,000 (around US\$38) to ISWAP for two weeks of fishing rights (or according to analyst Malik Samuel N1000 for

a one time fishing permit).¹⁰⁹ For every six cartons of fish caught one is given to ISWAP. ISWAP then charges N1000 to dealers who export these fish away from the Lake.¹¹⁰ ISWAP likewise taxes cattle herders on the basis of how many cattle they have.¹¹¹ Unsurprisingly, ISWAP does not report its income from these activities.¹¹² However, based on discussions with ISWAP members, among others, GICS estimates that the group made somewhere between \$24 and \$36 million (US\$) in revenue in 2018 from both its own economic activity and taxation, dwarfing the 2–3 million it was thought to receive annually from IS-core during the 2016–17 period.¹¹³ As will be described below, ISWAP's control of this activity is highly coercive (violently so at times – see below) even if civilians benefit from it.

There are some parallels here between ISWAP's "hearts and minds approach" and the way states seek to improve the "business climate" to attract investment: populations in the Lake Chad area who have had to choose whether to stay in ISWAP areas or move back to them from IDP camps are potential economic assets. Based on the conditions ISWAP offers, some will move to the areas where ISWAP provides them with services and protection (or stay in these areas). In doing so, they transfer their productive capacity and ISWAP benefits economically through taxation or direct employment. Encouraging people to make these choices can only be done however if the group offers a relatively stable and predictable environment. Salkida has described how ISWAP, following a collapse in the fishing trade by the time ISWAP broke away from JASDJ, approached fishermen and traders in IDP camps and encouraged them to return back to Lake Chad to continue fishing.¹¹⁴ Considering the conditions in some camps, both parties potentially benefit but only so long as ISWAP maintains a (*relatively*) safe environment for civilians. Such a strategy is not possible without a (*relatively*) liberal "hearts and minds" approach and a fairly high degree of predictability.

One of the core objectives of ISWAP's competitive control model is thus the development of economic activity in the areas where it exerts influence. This model is more sophisticated than that of JASDJ which was much more coercive. JASDJ engaged in a wide range of cruder activities such as the raiding and looting of cattle and raids on villages and kidnapping to sustain itself (ISWAP also relies on kidnapping as a source of revenue).¹¹⁵ The ISWAP approach by contrast has relied on developing existing and new trade processes, co-opting them and benefiting from them. Arguably this creates a more sustainable insurgency finance model. This in turn puts the military in a difficult position as it cannot shut down these ISWAP sources of funding without significantly impacting civilian livelihoods.¹¹⁶

Security and protection as the core of competitive control

As the core of its competitive control system, ISWAP offers – and has wanted to be seen to offer – protection and security to local communities. Security – in physical, economic, and personal sense – is a highly valuable resource in a region which has been blighted by conflict for over ten years and where other parties to the conflict – notably JASDJ – have been so violent. Communities request security as their number one concern and lament that this is not provided by the government.¹¹⁷ ISWAP's pro-population approach helps the group present its security-enhancing credentials in two ways.

Firstly, unlike other conflict actors especially JASDJ, but also the military at times, ISWAP does not *generally* target ordinary Muslim civilians and does not operate based on *direct* predation on the local community. Multiple reports from interviews and the open source literature attest to this fact (even if there are certainly reports of attacks [discussed below] and Christians have been frequently targeted).¹¹⁸ The group regularly draws on the legacy of Maman Nur (the aforementioned Boko Haram commander who was known to have a more lenient approach to civilians) when presenting themselves to civilians (and has reportedly continued to do even after Nur was killed by the ISWAP in 2018).¹¹⁹ Similarly, ISWAP propaganda highlights that the group does not target civilians. ISWAP videos stress this fact and highlight the positive benefits of living in ISWAP territory.¹²⁰ Reports from individuals in Borno suggest that encounters with ISWAP (something that would often have been very dangerous with JASDJ), have passed without violence.¹²¹ In some villages, parents are reportedly comfortable enough to let children escort the fighters out of town when they leave.¹²²

Secondly, in addition to generally not attacking civilians, ISWAP also actively provides forms of group and individual security. Reports suggest that ISWAP provided direct protection against JASDJ – a key benefit for populations in areas where JASDJ operates. For example, reports talk of ISWAP defending the population in the Diffa region of Niger from raids and kidnapping attempts by JASDJ-aligned factions and returning captured women and stolen goods.¹²³ Idayat Hassan has also highlighted that ISWAP will take retribution on individuals in JASDJ who kill civilians.¹²⁴ The group also protects pastoralists from attacks by bandits and provides safe routes for them.¹²⁵ Secondly, indirectly by forcing the state apparatus out of the areas they operate in, the group also protects from abuses both by miscreant soldiers but also corrupt officials who no longer operate in the areas. This is by no means to say that all state officials engage in abusive behavior (this is not the case). However, some are reported to do so, and ISWAP's presence stops that. Some ISWAP commanders also forbid sexual violence meaning there is generally a perception that women gain a degree of safety under ISWAP (relative to IDP camps where abuses are commonplace).¹²⁶ The group has also

apparently set up secure access to water in certain areas and provided some basic services.¹²⁷ The group apparently also distributes alms to IDPs and provides “soft loans” - an approach once favored by Boko Haram’s founder Mohammed Yusef.¹²⁸ Some of this seemingly pro-population activity still demonstrates the malign nature of the group however. For example, ISWAP has kidnapped health care workers to provide health services to populations where the group operates.¹²⁹

Importantly, given the stress on ISWAP’s economic activity mentioned above, the group also provides some economic security. In part this is providing economic opportunities: the group has restarted economic activities in its areas of influence, especially around Lake Chad – meaning more opportunities to earn a livelihood for those living there.¹³⁰ Reportedly the group does not tax farming but does tax those that buy goods from the farms for commercial activity.¹³¹ This focus on economic security, also involves establishing secure structures for trade. Crucially, because trade routes are blocked by the military (who fear that the fish and other trades are boosting the militants economic resources), ISWAP has sought to develop new trade routes for the pepper and fish trades for example as well as safe routes for pastoralists (as noted above).¹³² Some of these trade routes circumvent Nigerian military control entirely, taking goods into Cameroon and Niger before bringing them back into Nigeria to be exported further south. Likewise, ISWAP uses access to Trans-Saharan trade routes to export products across West Africa.¹³³ They also move both ways, helping traders to get their wares to market but also helping to get important products, such as fuel, back to the Lake.¹³⁴

While these “services” aid recruitment into ISWAP and attract people to move to areas where ISWAP has influence, this should certainly not be taken to mean that there is a wholesale support for ISWAP’s core ideology. Rather because of the protections afforded – a survival logic rather than an ideological choice is at play for many in the civilian population.¹³⁵ A development specialist in Abuja (who also had experience of several other conflict zones) noted the same, suggesting in a power vacuum people will align with those that can give them security, especially if they otherwise leave them largely alone.¹³⁶ One can see here how the hearts and minds character of ISWAP’s approach is supported by these security actions. The group has generally presented less of a direct threat than other conflict actors in the area and provides a crude form of protection against other predatory actors (JASDJ, corrupt officials, bandits). In addition, the group offers forms of limited health care and attention to “human security” issues (while these are rudimentary, they may be more than is offered by other actors in the region). Finally, the group offers a degree of economic security and economic protection for trade. In return ISWAP has generally not expected a great deal outside of abiding by their relatively relaxed (for a jihadist group) rules and paying taxes (although the latter can be rigorously enforced – see below). This security provision ultimately underpins

the core “hearts and minds” message of ISWAP’s competitive control model needed to attract economically productive activity and people to their area of operations (and retaining those there) - a core strategic feature of the ISWAP competitive control model.

The ability to interact with the population also has intelligence benefits for ISWAP. Observers highlight that one should not be surprised if the local population is engaged with and provides information to ISWAP. For these populations it is a situation of high risk and engaging with militants is an act of self-preservation.¹³⁷ Sometimes individuals may not even know they are passing on useful information. A retired Nigerian general spoken to highlighted how even seemingly innocuous information (such as who has visited a village, the type of vehicles used etc.) allows ISWAP to build up an intelligence picture.¹³⁸

A trap-like form of governance?

This provision of economic goods, security and provision of services is a form of “full spectrum” competitive control as described by Kilcullen. As with other competitive control structures it serves to pull people into their orbit and keep them there. ISWAP has done this in a very literal sense. Salkida notes for example how the group sent emissaries to internally displaced person camps in Borno state requesting that they return to their homes to farm and fish.¹³⁹ Several hundreds of families reportedly heeded this call with the poor conditions in the camps helping to push them back to ISWAP areas.¹⁴⁰ Older women apparently also moved in significant numbers to the Lake from Maiduguri to take advantage of new farming opportunities. Overall, ISWAP’s hearts and minds messaging, plus the provision of services, most notably security, has encouraged people to move to the areas they control.

ISWAP’s control system is by no means benign however – especially when it comes to economic matters. As noted above, while ISWAP is reported to be far less strict on civilians than JASDJ there are reports of ISWAP abuses of civilians connected with infringements of ISWAP’s economic rules, notably for not paying taxes (rather than other social rules whose infringements were routinely punished by JASDJ). Reports suggest that ISWAP has used significant, albeit highly targeted, violence to implement its system of control. For example, GICS reported that in January 2019 ISWAP infiltrated villages in Bosso, Niger in order to destroy stocks of pepper and kill traders who had refused to pay the fees that ISWAP applied to the pepper trade in the area.¹⁴¹ This action is thought to have served as a punishment, but also as a message to others, setting out very clearly the consequences of not abiding by ISWAP’s competitive control system. The result was apparently a significant increase in payments to ISWAP in the following weeks.¹⁴²

In June 2020, ISWAP attacked a village near Gubio in Borno state, killing as many as 90 people (including women and children) and stealing a large number of cattle.¹⁴³ This attack demonstrates the risks for civilians when they challenge ISWAP or try to remove themselves from its competitive control framework. ISWAP claimed the attack – initially a surprise to some analysts (including this one) because this type of attack was more associated with JASDJ (although it took place outside of areas normally associated with JASDJ at the time).¹⁴⁴ Reports suggest that the village had resisted ISWAP efforts to collect taxes and may have killed ISWAP officials who had come to collect monies.¹⁴⁵ ISWAP also claimed that the villagers had reported on their movements to the Nigerian military, a fact that seems to have been confirmed by the military itself.¹⁴⁶ This is consistent, however, with the research of Welsh who has noted that competition from other actors increases the likelihood of attacks against civilians and Rubin who has explored how the presence of viable state competition is likely to decrease support for insurgents.¹⁴⁷

A further smaller attack on civilians took place a few days later near Monguno (alongside an attack on the military in Monguno town). During the Monguno attack ISWAP distributed leaflets to local populations stressing that they fight “to protect the blood of Muslims, the integrity of Muslims and the wealth of Muslims. To harm them is forbidden to us,” and that civilians should avoid areas near the military to avoid being caught up in the fighting.¹⁴⁸ However, they also stress they “fight anybody that is fighting against Islam even if he claims to be a Muslim.”¹⁴⁹ Working with the Nigerian state against ISWAP would be, from ISWAP’s perspective, “fighting against Islam” (as they claim to represent a “real” Islam) and thus killing them would be permissible within ISWAP doctrine. In al-Barnawi’s interview with IS’s *al-Naba* magazine al-Barnawi claimed that ISWAP never attacks Muslims, yet also stated that Muslims should “Take care not to be drawn into helping the Crusaders against your Caliphate, not even with one word or half a word, for that is extreme apostasy.”¹⁵⁰ However, it is nevertheless not surprising that some of ISWAP’s most prominent attacks on civilians have been connected with economic matters given the core role that this plays in ISWAP’s competitive control model. Furthermore, as Kilcullen stresses (noted above), competitive control models almost always involve violence against those who challenge the militants or work with their opponents – a crucial part of their trap like quality. Therefore, what we may have seen with the Gubio attack is a very public and extremely brutal recalibration of the balance between carrots and sticks in ISWAP’s approach to competitive control.¹⁵¹

Finally, it is important to note that the actions of Nigerian government have also served to push individuals back to ISWAP and – to an extent – to reinforce ISWAPs competitive control system. Firstly, the Army has been often deeply suspicious of individuals – especially young men – who have been outside of areas of military control. There have been numerous reports of

arbitrary arrests and disappearances when men have been rounded up in clearances of towns by the military.¹⁵² Those found to have resided alongside, and especially to have interacted with, the militants are likely to come under suspicion and potential accusations of being ISWAP members. This has at times significantly raised the risks for those who seek to leave ISWAP areas of control.

More broadly, the general condition of internally displaced person camps in north-East Nigeria has dissuaded people from leaving ISWAP territory. The conditions in camps are often inadequate, overcrowded and insecure with limited food and few opportunities for employment.¹⁵³ While ISWAP has maintained a fairly liberal model (relatively speaking) for Muslims and continues to offer economic and security benefits to those who abide by its rules, it has been at times able to present a more attractive environment than the IDP camps. As noted above, the competitive control system of the military and ISWAP are essentially in competition and the ISWAP model, demonstrating the hearts and minds approach that ISWAP has employed since 2016, has a number of comparative advantages. All things being equal, the group requires less coercion to encourage people to stay, when the alternative is unattractive.

Conclusion

In contrast to JASDJ, ISWAP has implemented a more population-centric form of insurgency seeking to win “hearts and minds.” The notion of hearts and minds however only captures part of ISWAP’s activity and neither elucidates the strategic underpinnings of this “pro-population” activity nor accounts for the continued violence of the group. ISWAP has certainly adopted a different position on attacking civilians when compared to JASDJ and the group has sought to provide civilians with security and some basic services. While successive ISWAP leaderships have likely agreed in principle with a relatively less violent approach toward civilians (and one sees this strand of thinking within parts of Boko Haram since at least the emergence of Ansaru), establishing a hearts and minds-based competitive control system also carries strategic benefits.

Rather than loot from, and often kill, civilians, the provision of a more secure and predictable climate has allowed ISWAP to position itself as a more attractive option vis-à-vis JASDJ and to some extent the state. It has thus been better able to establish forms of economic activity that it can tax to benefit the insurgency. Economic activity in the areas where ISWAP operates is largely penetrated by the group and although ISWAP ultimately benefits from this activity, they have sought to make areas they control a (relatively) attractive place to farm and do business. Doing so allows them to capture

economic activity within their territory in a way that shares parallels with states' attempts to capture investment.

There is a trap-like quality to this competitive control model, however. While generally less violent than JASDJ toward Muslim civilians (and at times less directly coercive than the military), ISWAP is still a violent group and very willing to use extreme violence to protect its control system. As the 2020 example of the attack near Gubio demonstrates, moving against ISWAP can be very dangerous indeed.

Overall, ISWAP has developed a control system that is able to effectively compete within the eco-system of violence in Northeast Nigeria. The concept of competitive control, initially developed by Fall but revived by Kilcullen, provides a useful framework for both explaining and analyzing militant groups' strategic approaches to civilian populations and how these approaches serve both economic and ultimately military functions. In so doing, this concept offers an important addition to the evolving and exciting literature on jihadi governance in Africa, bridging the gap between strategic approaches focused on the military activities of these groups and wider discussions of governance practices. Likewise, it also picks up on recent threads in the literature on rebel governance, showing how ISWAP, a group that does not control and hold territory in a conventional sense is nonetheless able to control populations and extract resources for its insurgency. Likewise, it speaks directly to a number of other themes in the literature on rebel governance, especially those like the work of Welsh, Breslawski, Ruben and Conrad, Reyes, and Stewart on the interrelationship between governance and violence. Differing forms of competitive control are, however, understudied in the academic literature on jihadist groups. Future (comparative) research could explore the different types of competitive control systems advanced by other jihadist groups in the West African region and beyond to better understand how different eco-systems of violence and forms of rebel governance spawn differing strategies of population control.

Notes

1. Notes.

The *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (JASDJ) group pledged allegiance to Islamic State in March 2015 becoming the "Islamic State West Africa Province." A little over a year later in August 2016 however, under the weight of significant internal ideological and strategic disagreements, the group broke in two with a smaller (at the time) group led by Abu Musab-al Barnawi retaining the ISWAP name and the official designation as an IS province from IS in Iraq/Syria.

2. GICS, "Survival and Expansion: The Islamic State's West African Province" (The Global Initiative For Civil Stabilization, Abuja, 2019), <https://conflictstudies.gics.live/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/GICS-Survival-And-Expansion-of-the-Islamic-States-West-African-Province-Full.pdf>. UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,

- “Twenty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities” (United Nations Security Council, 2019), p. 11, <https://undocs.org/S/2019/570>.
3. Ahmed Salkida, “SPECIAL REPORT: Why Troops Are Losing Ground To ISWAP,” Sahara Reporters, <http://saharareporters.com/2019/01/02/special-report-why-troops-are-losing-ground-iswap>.
 4. Murtala Abdullahi, “Nigerian Troops Suffer Heavy Losses in ISWAP Ambush,” HumAngle, <https://humangle.ng/heavy-losses-on-nigerian-troops-following-iswap-ambush/>; “Boko Haram Jihadists in Deadly Clash with Army in Southwestern Niger,” France 24, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200506-boko-haram-jihadists-in-deadly-clash-with-army-in-southwestern-niger>.
 5. AFP (2021). “Extremists overrun Nigerian army base as residents flee,” Al-Arabiya, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2021/02/21/Extremists-overrun-Nigerian-army-base-as-residents-flee>.
 6. Humangle (2021). “Boko Haram leader, Shekau, dead as ISWAP fighters capture Sambisa forest – Report,” Premium Times, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/462774-boko-haram-leader-shekau-dead-as-iswap-fighters-capture-sambisa-forest-report.html>.
 7. Dahiru, Aliyu. (2022). “The Islamic State Campaign That Led To Kuje Prison Attack,” Humangle Media, 2022, <https://humanglemedia.com/the-islamic-state-campaign-that-led-to-kuje-prison-attack/>.
 8. The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) codes for ISWAP (gsubname = Al-Barnawi faction – Islamic State West Africa Province – ISWAP) rather than just “Boko Haram.” The drawback of the GTD is that its data only covers up to mid-2021. The other key database for this type of data, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Database (ACLED), is more up to date, but does not code reliably between ISWAP and JASDJ/Boko Haram. As such the GTD data has been used here. The coverage of the GTD data does however cover the timespan under investigation here (2016-mid 2021).
 9. And “ISWAP” before the split. i.e. this figure is capturing the group led by Abubakar Shekau.
 10. Bulama Bukarti, “The Battle for Hearts and Minds in the Lake Chad Basin,” Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, <https://institute.global/policy/battle-hearts-and-minds-lake-chad-basin>; Paul Carsten, Ahmed Kingimi, “Islamic State ally stakes out territory around Lake Chad,” Reuters, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-nigeria-security/islamic-state-ally-stakes-out-territory-around-lake-chad-idUKKBN1111BP>; Colin Freeman, “Boko Haram Adopts ‘Hearts and Minds’ Strategy in Nigeria – Inspired by ISIL,” The Telegraph, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/boko-haram-adopts-hearts-minds-strategy-nigeria-inspired-isil/>; Idayat Hassan, “Opinion: The Danger of a Better Behaved Boko Haram,” The New Humanitarian, <http://www.thenehumanitarian.org/opinion/2018/08/21/opinion-nigeria-militancy-peace-boko-haram>; ICG, “Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State West Africa Province,” International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/273-facing-challenge-islamic-state-west-africa-province>.
 11. Kassim, Abdulbasit. “Boko Haram’s internal civil war: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as recipes for Schism.” *Boko Haram beyond the headlines: Analyses of Africa’s enduring insurgency* (2018): 3–32. Dahiru, Aliyu, (2021) “Takfir: The Ideological Conflict That Divided Boko Haram,” Humangle Media, <https://humanglemedia.com/takfir-the-ideological-conflict-that-divided-boko-haram/>.

12. ISWAP's practice since then has stayed *broadly* consistent with what is documented here. However, it is beyond the scope of this article to examine in detail the post-Shekau period (although this would certainly make an interesting follow-up paper).
13. Andrew Walker, *Eat the Heart of the Infidel: The Harrowing of Nigeria and the Rise of Boko Haram*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Virginia Comolli, *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Kyari Mohammed, "The Message and Methods of Boko Haram." in *Boko Haram: Islamism, politics, security and the state in Nigeria*, ed Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (Leiden: African Studies Center 2014): 9–32; Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Oriola, T. B. (2021). Nigerian Soldiers on The War Against Boko Haram. *African Affairs*, 120 (479), 147–75.
14. For exceptions see: ICG, "Facing the Challenge;" Jacob Zenn. *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria*. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers Incorporated, 2020); Akali Omeni. *Insurgency and War in Nigeria: Regional Fracture and the Fight Against Boko Haram*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019); Stoddard, Edward. "Revolutionary warfare? Assessing the Character of Competing Factions Within the Boko Haram Insurgency." *African Security* 12, no. 3–4 (2019): 300–29.
15. Stathis Kalyvas. "Jihadi rebels in civil war." *Dædalus* 147, no. 1 (2018): 36–47; Craig Whiteside. "New masters of revolutionary warfare: The Islamic State movement (2002–2016)." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 4 (2016): 4–18. Edward Stoddard. "Revolutionary warfare? Assessing the character of competing factions within the Boko Haram insurgency." *African Security* 12, no. 3–4 (2019): 300–29; Morten Bøås and Kevin Dunn. *Africa's Insurgents: Navigating an Evolving Landscape*. (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2017); Dixon, Matthew, and George Lawson. "From revolution and terrorism to revolutionary terrorism: the case of militant Salafism." *International Affairs* 98, no. 6 (2022): 2119–39.
16. Kalyvas, "Jihadi Rebels," 36.
17. Bøås and Dunn, *Africa's Insurgents*, 235.
18. Bernard Fall, "The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency," *Naval War College Review* 18, no. 3 (1965): 21–38; David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
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20. Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains*, 126.
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ORCID

Edward Stoddard  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5106-6315>