

Protecting Civilians as Strategy: Supporting a Conflict Sensitive Response to the Strategic Challenge of ‘Jihadist’ Armed Groups in the Wider Sahel (Central Sahel and Lake Chad)

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Introduction

This briefing advocates for placing civilian protection at the heart of counter ‘jihadist’ militant strategies in the wider Sahel. It argues that civilian protection in jihadist-related conflicts is not only the morally the right thing to do and in line with national and international legal commitments, but strategically essential in the face of highly-adaptive jihadist groups who, when they have sufficient military space, implement increasingly similar forms of governance to win over and control populations for both ideological and strategic reasons. **Put simply, when they have space, jihadists govern, and they do so because they get strategic resources needed to prosecute their long-term revolutionary insurgent goals.** While the increasing convergence in civilian-focused governance practices of jihadists highlights the need for **civilian protection responses at a strategic level to undermine them**, responses at the operational and tactical level in given locations need **high levels of ongoing context and conflict sensitivity to implement this civilian protection.**

This briefing is based on findings from a three-year British Academy-funded research project on the security crises in the wider Sahel¹. Comprising 11 political scientists and historians based in Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, the UK, Italy and Kuwait², the project team examined the Lake Chad and Central Sahel crises from both historical and contemporary social science perspectives. In addition to archival research and an extensive survey of both academic and ‘grey’ literature, the research involved over 100 interviews in Mali, Nigeria, Niger and Senegal, as well as in Brussels and Paris. The core goal of this project is to support the conflict sensitivity of local and extra-regional actors who intervene in these conflicts by comparatively assessing the respective historical, local and transnational influences on ‘jihadist’ groups and those that resist them.

Policy Context

Over the last decade, responses to conflicts in the wider Sahel have lacked ‘conflict sensitivity’ and, measured in terms of their ability to abate these conflicts, have been largely a-strategic. Similar, overly-militarised strategies in different countries have lacked the nuanced, context-specific understanding needed to have lasting impact against adaptive ‘jihadist’ foes linked to al-Qaeda and the ‘Islamic State’ (IS) who have proven able to evolve as the situation on the ground has changed and have grown in strength as a result.

A consequence of growing jihadist capabilities, and the inability of France and the US to degrade them, has been a delegitimation of these external actors, resulting in their withdrawal. Multilateral initiatives, whether from the UN, the EU or regional actors have also proven largely ineffective. The resulting geo-political space has been filled by Russia, yet neither Russia nor its proxies (Wagner/Africa Corps) appear to have the ideas or will to stem the tide of the jihadists.

¹ ‘The Sahel Crisis in Historical and Contemporary Perspective: Supporting a Conflict-Sensitive Approach Through Interdisciplinary Research’ funded by the British Academy/Global Challenges Research Fund (TGC\200298).

² The researchers on this project were: Isaac Albert, Tony Chafer, Brema Ely Dicko, Melita Lazell, Jennifer Lofkrantz, Chitra Nagarajan, Babacar Ndiaye, Luca Raineri, Marie Rodet, Ed Stoddard (Principal Investigator) and Mamoudou Sy.

In this context, this project sought to provide evidence that could inform a different approach based on two methodological pillars: 1) a comparative, multi-lingual, cross-regional analysis leveraging similarities and differences between cases across the wider region to provide high level observations on the practices of jihadist groups in different contexts and 2) a historically-nuanced and context-focused approach on the local and transnational drivers of jihadist activities. This latter is important as academic studies increasingly highlight the importance of understanding the **interplay of local and transnational drivers** of these groups.

The project comprised three strands: The first studies the revolutionary character of historic jihads in the 18th and 19th centuries – a useful point of comparison given contemporary groups' revolutionary character. The second bridges past and present, exploring comparatively how memory of historic jihads is utilised by both jihadists and those that resist them. The final strand compared the governance and fighting practices of IS groups ('ISSP' in the central Sahel and 'ISWAP' in the Lake Chad) and their civilian impacts.

The Revolutionary Character of Historic Jihad and Contemporary Jihadists

While different in the form of Islam they practised, leaders of historic 'jihads' in the 18th and 19th centuries, like their contemporary counterparts, were revolutionary in intent, seeking widescale societal transformations through expansion. In practice however, over time, they fell short of these objectives, as local pre-existing social structures reasserted themselves, watering down their scope and blending with religiously-inspired structures and rules.

History does not repeat itself and the leaders of historic jihads were very different from contemporary armed groups (indeed they remain revered in many parts of West Africa for spreading Islam within the region). However, this observation on revolutionary intent and the impact of existing structures speaks to the positions of the two major groups in the wider Sahel where al-Qaeda groups appear more accommodating of local dynamics and power structures and outwardly more revolutionary IS groups that are less accommodating of such structures.

All IS and al-Qaeda groups in the Sahel practise a form of revolutionary warfare. More commonly understood as a practice of Marxist-inspired militant groups, revolutionary warfare sees a desire to replace existing political structures of the state with a new radical vision through armed force. Specifically, this is achieved through a **gradually more competent insurgent force that grows from a guerrilla force to a (semi-)conventional army over time. In the traditional revolutionary warfare model, the insurgency, at least in its early to mid-stages, draws its power from its governance control over populations and their resources.**

Like the leaders of historic jihads in the Sahel, contemporary IS groups are revolutionary in strategic intent and thus in terms of the governance structures they promote. Like other practitioners of revolutionary warfare, **both groups have sought to become more militarily capable over time and both have sought to derive power through the imposition of governance and the resources - social and economic – this affords them.** The way they do so, and the extent to which they can achieve this, is, however, shaped by a mix of adherence to IS doctrine and local dynamics that impact on these strategic goals.

Historical Memory Matters in Sahelian Conflicts

While it would be wrong to draw too strong a parallel between today's conflicts and those of the past, memory of these historic jihads matters in Sahelian conflicts. It is thus important to understand this alongside other more commonly studied drivers of conflict (external influences/ideologies, local state actions/weapons supply etc). **This is especially the case as jihadists will try to insert themselves into long-running intercommunal conflicts that have historical roots going back centuries as 'protectors' of certain communities** (albeit in conflicts they have often helped stoke).

Jihadist groups (even ISWAP) draw privately (but not publicly) on legacies of past jihads for legitimisation in their engagement with communities they wish to govern and control. Groups that resist them, both in the Lake Chad Basin and Sahel, also draw parallels between historic jihads (that impacted negatively their forebears) and present-day jihadists. Some communities also draw parallels between abusive state forces today and historic figures like the 19th century warlord and slave trader Rabih who controlled a vast swathe of the Lake Chad area.

Historical memory can also be a source of collective civilian knowledge in terms of *how to respond* to the presence of conflict actors. Communities in Borno state, Nigeria, for example, re-animated centuries-old escape plans to evade Boko Haram by retreating to historic hiding places. In some cases, elders had passed down this information

and communities had shielded it for generations from outsiders. In other cases, where communities had been less guarded, Boko Haram learned of their hiding places.

Governance Practices: The Convergence of ISSP and ISWAP ‘Strategic’ Governance

Sahelian IS-linked groups are not uniform in their provision of governance, but they have been converging on a more governance-focused approach. Despite differences, they exhibit common characteristics including governance of economic activities, the offer of protection, similar restrictions on women, taxation rules, justice provision and implementation of punishments for infringements of their rules. They increasingly adopt similar internal structures to administer this. While their governance is no doubt in part ideological, groups practise population control through governance as a crucial strategic objective because it provides them with resources. **Civilians, and their economic activities, are the core resource base of IS groups.** Of the two groups, ISWAP has demonstrated more organised governance provision and wider range of services for a longer period than ISSP. Nevertheless, more recently ISSP has extended its governance in its areas of activity.

This governance from both groups is inspired in form by IS. IS documents (often exactly the same as those in Iraq/Syria) have been distributed to explain the group’s rules in the Central Sahel and ISWAP reportedly takes strategic guidance from IS on a range of matters including, for example, the distribution of war spoils.

However local (recent) histories and trajectories matter here too. Indeed, the governance approach of ISWAP was driven in large part as a reaction against the brutality of JAS (*Jamā’at Abl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wab wa’l-Jihād*, aka “Boko Haram”). This includes a less violent approach towards women. While ISWAP is still highly repressive, it treats women in the group better than JAS did (albeit a very low bar) and ISWAP does not use female suicide bombers, one of the most egregious of Boko Haram’s practices. Both IS groups are highly patriarchal however, and the status of women, and their life experiences, are heavily conditioned by the relationships to male fighters and other male group members.

Despite the strategic goal to govern (and to be seen to govern), ISWAP and ISSP is in part ‘fighter-centric’ in that some governance (especially social and health provision and to some extent education) **is an offshoot of support for fighters.** Material support for fighters is a core requirement of commanders, but the provision of support is also extended to civilians. This means in practice that some civilians living in areas close to fighters may have better provision than that delivered through state institutions. The latter has often been very limited in remote areas of the Sahel. As such, while jihadist governance may be rudimentary, it may be quite impactful for civilians.

Governance (and control) of economic matters (including the facilitation of markets and trading) is tied to fighters in a different way. Here governance is less about proximity to fighters and more tied to ISWAP and ISSP’s mobility and ability to be present in the territory in which economic activity happens or passes through. IS groups do not need to control this territory in a permanent sense, but they need to make sure the military does not. As such, **if governance for civilians is in part linked to proximity to fighters, economic governance – and the resources captured from it - is linked to the control afforded by fighter mobility.** This is in turn linked to their military practices, to which we now turn.

Military Practices: IS-groups Converging from Different Starting Points

IS groups in West Africa are not uniform in their military behaviour but they increasingly have similar goals and practices. When conditions allow, all groups’ military activities start to converge with IS practices.

Examples include use of increasingly conventional military tactics, a growing focus on attacking the military rather than civilians, local officials etc, the adoption of armoured vehicle-based suicide attacks (by ISWAP), and more recently the adoption of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Equally IS-alignment is evidenced in ISSP and ISWAP propaganda on attacks, which is released by IS (although their behaviour arguably tells us much more, given that the propaganda is likely heavily curated by IS). **The net effect of this military activity when successful is that it creates space for these groups, space they use to govern for the strategic reasons mentioned in the previous section.**

Key moments of IS intervention (i.e. the split between JAS and ISWAP, the ‘merger’ of ISSP and ISWAP) have contributed to changes in their behaviour that have led towards more competent military activities. Yet instructions, reportedly from IS, to expand beyond their Lake Chad stronghold have arguably weakened ISWAP.

This indicates, while groups listen to IS guidance, this guidance, delivered from thousands of miles away, may contribute to problems for the groups.

As in the governance case, ISWAP has demonstrated more sophisticated military activities over a more sustained period than ISSP. ISWAP was for several years able to behave as a more effective and dangerous insurgent force capable of raiding large government bases on a regular basis, a feat achieved less often by ISSP which has relied on a more irregular set of tactics. ISWAP used this space to set up its governance structures in areas close to Lake Chad, especially from 2018 onwards. However, here again local dynamics play an important role. ISWAP started with a higher level of military capability than ISSP, inheriting some of this knowledge and experience from JAS. Thus, while IS has reportedly provided some limited training to ISWAP, the growth in capabilities of these groups is not an effect of IS alone.

The extent of ISSP and ISWAP's military activities is highly conditioned by local factors, notably the capabilities of state/non-state forces aligned against them. ISWAP has faced a more capable Nigerian military in recent years and suffered as a result, with its capacities for large scale massed attacks diminished. Since the French withdrawal from the Sahel, ISSP has faced a more benign environment, which has permitted more complex operations and more space. The groups have thus converged to some extent, as ISWAP has been degraded (from a higher starting point) and ISSP has raised its capabilities (from a lower base). **The goal of both appears however, to be to create space and then to use that space to implement strategically-focused governance.**

Violence Against Civilians Remains (and has worsened in the Lake Chad Area)

ISWAP's previously more tolerant population-focused approach towards civilians appears to be on the wane. As the capability of the group breaks down in the face of state-led military action, it faces absorption of (historically very violent) former-JAS elements further south in Borno state and faces competition from remaining JAS fighters. Moving further south has also brought the group more often into contact with non-Muslim communities which it readily attacks.

Following France's withdrawal from the region, ISSP appears to be moving in the opposite direction, from a very violent and haphazard approach towards civilians, to a more ISWAP-like governance model.

There appears to be a relationship between more civilian-focused and less violent governance and heightened military capabilities on the part of groups. The more they are militarily challenged the more violent they are towards civilians. There is a paradox for interveners therefore: **degrading the group militarily, at least initially, might mean more violence against civilians and less service provision.**

Providing information to those who oppose the groups or being seen to side with their enemies (state or non-state) sees the most severe punishments by ISWAP and ISSP. However, other infractions (including not following economic rules for example) can also see civilians killed.

Recommendations

Overarching Recommendations for all Parties:

1. Ensure that protection of civilians is factored into strategic decision-making, not just as a morally good-to-do but as a strategic and operational necessity. Military-heavy, 'terrorist-centric' approaches have generally not worked. Such approaches need to be replaced by a policy that reflects the strategic focus (and burden) jihadists place on civilians, and correspondingly places protection of them at the heart of strategic responses to these conflicts.
2. Given the adaptability of jihadist groups and the changing character of their behaviours over time, ensure that all interventions - developmental, security, diplomatic - are designed and constantly monitored for conflict sensitivity. This should include, among other more commonly studied factors, the historic dimensions of these conflicts and the respective balance of local and global influences at any given time.

Policy Recommendations for West African Militaries:

1. Undermine jihadist groups' population-focused strategies that purport to protect civilians, by continually assessing (and if necessary, re-calibrating) operational plans around a primary strategic goal of civilian protection.
2. Eliminate abuses of civilians by soldiers (and armed volunteer groups) as much as possible by:

- a. Enforcing penalties for those responsible for such acts (and commanders who permit them).
- b. Promoting commanders (including of volunteer groups) who achieve strategic goals while protecting civilians.
3. Beat jihadists at their own game of fighter-centric governance by embedding civilian services (such as medical care) with soldiers.
4. Do not close markets or other activities necessary for civilians to survive. Instead deny jihadists resources directly by focusing special and other elite forces on high mobility, high intensity operations in transit routes used by jihadists. These need not kill or capture jihadists to be successful. The goal is to keep them immobile so they cannot tax or capture resources.
5. Avoid forcing civilians to make a choice between armed groups and pro-government forces when they are trying to survive in contested zones. Armed groups try to create an 'us or them' dynamic and civilians have little choice but to acquiesce to their governance (economic or social). Punishing them for engagement with militants will just drive them to the armed groups out of necessity. Likewise, forcing them to demonstrate allegiance to the government will put them in great danger.

Policy recommendations for West African Presidents/Defence/Security Ministers:

1. Ensure the highest levels of strategic leadership in the military and intelligence services are focused on civilian protection as a key strategic goal.
2. Support point 1 above at lower levels, by instituting a new:
 - a. "Strategic Protection Medal of Honour" for strategically high performing commanders who achieve strategic goals while protecting civilians.
 - b. "Operational Protection Medal of Honour" for operationally high performing NCOs and other ranks who achieve operational/tactical goals while protecting civilians.
3. Undermine jihadist groups' abilities to leverage existing conflicts to bolster themselves by:
 - a. Supporting conflict mediation through inclusive dialogues with all non-jihadist parties
 - b. Maintain an open offer of a place at these inclusive dialogues to jihadist groups in return for ceasefire.
4. Drain jihadist ranks by offering amnesties to people in jihadist groups and those living in areas they control.
5. Institute a civilian harm monitoring team comprising data scientists and local area specialists that assesses patterns of civilian harms and harm-reduction and feeds this information to military commanders to adjust operational strategies and tactics accordingly.

Policy Recommendations for Western External Powers

1. Avoid one of the primary causes of delegitimation over time (by local actors and global power adversaries) by ensuring the ongoing monitoring of all interventions for conflict sensitivity measured in terms of how they improve civilian protection in the medium term.
2. Monitor external interveners (i.e. Russia) for conflict sensitivity measured in terms of a strategy of civilian-protecting counter-insurgency. Condemn actions that counter this aim.
3. Encourage strategic civilian-focused behaviour among partner governments and militaries by:
 - a. Privately (and when appropriate, publicly) praising commanders, generals, and ministers/presidents for high performing counterinsurgency operations. In-country teams are best placed to do this, but commendations should come from high-ranking officers relayed by ambassadors (i.e. soldier to soldier with a government stamp of approval).
 - b. Privately, but rarely publicly, condemning commanders and generals who are known to permit human rights abuses. This will have greater traction when done alongside (a) above.
4. Supply militaries (or specific units) with new ISR and high mobility equipment (and relevant training) to support high mobility operations against jihadist transit routes when they demonstrate commitment to civilian protection.
5. Organise an annual conference of military commanders and intelligence leaders in West Africa to share and celebrate best practices in terms of population-centric operations. This should be a closed, but highly prestigious, event to signify its importance. When an area or theatre commander is selected, their commanding officers should also be invited to commend them equally on their strategic leadership.

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