Journal of History and Military Studies (JHMS), Department of History and War Studies, Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA), Kaduna, Nigeria
ISSN PRINT: 2536-6726 ONLINE: 2734-388X Volume 9 NO 2, JULY, 2026

Comparative Security Threat Dynamics of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the Lake Chad Basin

Author(s)

Umar Saleh; Saheed Babajide Owonikoko

Affiliation:
Centre for Peace and Security Studies, Modibbo Adama University, Yola, Adamawa, Nigeria

Email: umasal4real@gmail.com

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Abstract

The Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS), otherwise called Boko Haram and its splinter group, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have sustained a protracted insurgency that has affected the wider Lake Chad Basin region since the mid-2000s. Despite that the two factions emerged from the same group and locality, scholars and policy analysts frequently analyse them as a single security phenomenon. They ignore their differences in regards to mode of operations, violence patterns and the way and manner they relate to local populations. This study made use of a qualitative comparative case study design, obtaining data from key informant interviews and focus group discussions from Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. Correspondingly, data were collected from conflict event datasets and relevant secondary sources. Findings show that JAS continued to indiscriminately launch attacks against innocent people of all faiths. While ISWAP developed into a more structured and adaptive armed group that strategize its attacks on military targets. At the same time employ coercive mechanisms to exert control over locals. In spite of it selective targets, ISWAP's impact on economies, transportations, and overall livelihoods posed a greater and lasting threat to both state and human security. Based on the Securitization framework, the paper argues that it is inadequate to rely on civilian-related casualty data solely to explain the complex security dynamics in the Lake Chad region. Effective security restoration in the region requires further strategies that integrate military intelligence-driven operations, institutional restoration, civilian protections, and socio-economic recovery to enable people to rebuild their lives.

Keywords: *Boko Haram, ISWAP, JAS, regional security, Lake Chad Basin, counterinsurgency*

Introduction

Almost two decades now, the Lake Chad region **-** encompassing northeastern Nigeria, northern Cameroon, southeastern Niger, and western Chad has been affected by a continued insurgency. This has eroded regional security, weakened governance structures, and severely affected civilian livelihoods. The insurgency started as a localized Islamist movement in northeast Nigeria and has now expanded into a transnational conflict spreading across national boundaries. The region has long been fragile, characterized by porous borders, limited state presence, and entrenched socio-economic challenges. These conditions together facilitated the cross-border movement and expansion of armed groups.[1] Although the groups shared the same origin, numerous existing literature and prevailing policy approaches continue to frame JAS and ISWAP as a unified security challenge. An obvious understanding of their divergences is essential for designing effective counter-insurgency responses. This is because it enhances civilian protection, and promotes regional stabilization efforts. The insurgency exacerbated after the 2009 incidents of clashes between JAS and authority that led to the extrajudicial killing of the group's leader, Muhammad Yusuf. Since then the movement took a violent dimension particularly under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau.

The insurgency's current dimensional strategy includes grabbing land, kidnapping for ransom, suicide bombings, and violence against innocent people. In 2015–2016, the group experienced a major split due to the argument over legitimate targets specifically whether it is right to continue targeting Muslims an issue that led to the emergence of ISWAP.[2] ISWAP subsequently underwent a significant reconfiguration in terms of its organizational structure and operational strategy. Support from the main leaders of Islamic State enabled ISWAP to create a better organized command system. The group subsequently focused its attacks on military bases while simultaneously seeking to gain support from local populations through service provisions, tax collections, and cash distributions.

This study therefore advances three major contributions to the existing scholarship. First, it presents a clear comparison of JAS and ISWAP as distinct security threats rather than seeing them as part of the same overall insurgency. Second, Securitization theory suggests that just looking at heavy civilian casualties alone does not adequately explain the severity of security threat in the Lake Chad basin. Rather, ISWAP's governance strategy and civilian control poses major risks to government authority and civilian safety. Third, it provides important information about the challenges military forces face when using counter-insurgency strategies against the insurgents. The study aimed to achieve two main objectives: (1) to analyze the distinct security threats associated with JAS and ISWAP and their implications for regional stability in the Lake Chad Basin; and (2) to assess the effectiveness of existing counterinsurgency measures in responding to their evolving threats.

2. Review of Relevant Literature

2.1 The Split in Boko Haram and Operational Differences

Boko Haram's fracture into JAS and ISWAP represents a significant shift in the security dynamics of the Lake Chad region. The 2016 schism within Boko Haram is generally attributed to disagreements over Shekau's leadership, the group's increasing violence against Muslim civilians, and differences over its ideological message and relationship with the broad Islamic State movements.[3] From the above point, however, the literature is not centralised. One strand, represented in Thurston's institutional chronicle, deals with the break up largely as an intra- organizational conflict, a leadership contestation that does not, in itself, imply two distinct threat profiles. Salihu explicitly deviates from this account, arguing that the split reflects actual ideological disagreement instead of a personality clash, and that this bifurcation produces two distinct security problems rather than one disintegrated group.[4] The controversy matters. If the internal organizational-crisis account is correct, both groups are best understood as variants of a single threat that can be addressed with a single counter-insurgency logic. On the other hand, if Salihu is correct, they require different assessment architectures and different responses. The Shekau-led faction, JAS, uses extreme violent methods against Muslim civilians it regards as insufficiently orthodox, while ISWAP adopts a more selective operational strategy focused on more specific, often state-aligned, targets. In spite of this established behavioural contrast, most recent studies do not resolve the Thurston–Salihu tension; they rather describe JAS and ISWAP in parallel without stating which account of the split they are working from, which is itself a gap in how the literature is currently constructed.

Clearly speaking, a related, and a large portion of unaddressed dispute concerns what fragmentation is expected to perform to overall insecurity. Theoretical perspective on insurgent fragmentation suggests that organizational division amplifies general insecurity, since breakaway factions pursue divergent objectives, adopt adaptive strategies, and diversify their violence.[5] In an empirical manner, however, the Lake Chad case does not correspond to this expectation fairly. ISWAP has consolidated and tactically became professional since the split, while JAS has deteriorated due to increase military pressure and the death of Shekau in 2021. This difference between theoretical augury and the empirical trajectory of the both factions is seldom engaged directly in the literature. Studies tend to observe the contrast in consequences as an interesting fact rather than as evidence that challenges the fragmentation-intensifies-insecurity argument. In other words, existing studies, often move past descriptive organizational contrasts to systematically assess how fragmentation produces divergent, rather than uniform, security outcomes for different targeted groups.

2.2 Insurgent Governance versus Civilian Victimization

A further significant issue concerns the harm inflicted on civilians in relation to insurgent regulation. Here the literature contains a sharper and added resultant disagreement. JAS is consistently linked to extreme violence against civilians, including Muslims, large-scale abductions, forced recruitment, and suicide attacks.[6] ISWAP, by contrast, is often characterized in the governance literature as pursuing legitimacy through selected service provision, civilian protection, and involvement in local economic activity. This is consistent with the broader civil-war argument that insurgents seeking territorial control calibrate violence to secure compliance and not simply terrorize.[7] ISWAP's control of fishing activities, agriculture, and commerce in the Lake Chad region exemplifies this perception of "insurgent as alternative governor" model.

This governance narrative, however, is directly disputed instead of simply extended by more recent evidence. The International Crisis Group's 2024 evaluation challenges the coercive-but-selective account of ISWAP behaviour, thereby documenting violence against communities perceived to be government/security forces informants that sits uneasily with a purely legitimacy-seeking model.[8] The tension here is substantive, not cosmetic, as the Mampilly/Kalyvas governance structure predicts that a group seeking legitimacy will minimize indiscriminate violence, while the ICG findings suggest ISWAP's selectivity is conditional and can revert to punitive violence when its authority is disputed. The literature has not yet reconciled these positions since studies published before 2024 tend to treat ISWAP's governance orientation as settled, while the ICG evidence suggests it should be treated as contingent and under-theorized. Proving which conditions push ISWAP from a governance logic toward a coercive one, a question these studies leave open is itself part of what a comparative threat assessment needs to resolve.

2.3 Regionalization and Cross-Border Insurgency

The insurgency in the Lake Chad region is largely characterized as a multi-state conflict affecting Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, but scholars differ on what is driving that regionalization. Oshinfowokan and Ukeaja trace the trajectory of Boko Haram from a localized Nigerian movement into a transnational security issue, an account that emphasizes bottom-up diffusion. The insurgency outgrew Nigeria's borders as pressure, opportunity, and porous borders pushed it outward.[9] Barkindo's account of ISWAP's integration into the Islamic State's wilayat structure across Africa emphasizes the opposite causal direction, a top-down process in which regional expansion follows from Islamic State strategy and cross-border coordination instead of resulting from organic overspill.[10]

These explanations are not equal of the same phenomenon; they determine the instrument of regionalization in disparate places, and the literature has commonly allowed both narratives to stand in the same time rather than testing them against one another or

specifying where each applies. For JAS, which has basically deviates from the conventional Islamic State network, the bottom-up account may becoming better. But for ISWAP, the top-down account may fit better. Yet the comparative implication of this is that the two factions may be regionalizing for structurally distinct reasons. But it is not academically developed in the existing literature, which tends to discuss regionalization as a single, shared feature of the Lake Chad insurgency and not as an additional point on which JAS and ISWAP diverge.

2.4 Limitations in Comparing Threat Assessments

Putting this together, the existing literature is not exclusively deficient; it is inwardly divided in ways that have not been explicitly addressed. This paper identifies three unresolved disagreements regarding the literature. First, scholars disagree on whether the 2015–2016 break up reflects an actual ideological divergence with distinct threat implications as Salihu argued; or a crisis within organization that does not warrant treating JAS and ISWAP as separate threat categories, the organizational-crisis account described by Thurston. Second, scholars differ on whether ISWAP-civilians relationship is best captured by a governance-and-legitimacy model of Mampilly and Kalyvas or by a more conditional, coercion-capable model of ICG 2024. Third, accounts of regionalization differs on whether cross-border expansion is driven initially by local diffusion as put forward by Oshinfowokan and Ukeaja or by top-down Islamic State strategy of Barkindo, with little attempt to specify which mechanism applies to which group.

Empirically, none of these disagreements has been determined in a way that would allow a systematic comparison of JAS and ISWAP as distinct security threats. Rather, the dominant approach in the literature is to rely on casualty counts and broad narrative description as the central indicators of threat intensity, which is exactly the kind of measure that cannot resolve the disputes identified above. Security studies scholars argue that security analysis should not be exclusively limited to military issues alone when it comes to assessment it should rather integrate intervention across military, societal, political, including governance structures, and environmental sectors to counter threats of violence.[11] Applying these criteria consistently to JAS and ISWAP would speak directly to the three disagreements just identified. So far there is lack of empirical research that does so. This paper responds to that gap. Instead of treating the JAS–ISWAP distinction, ISWAP's civilian relations, and the drivers of regionalization as settled, it employs a comparative threat-assessment framework to test these competing accounts against the evidence from the Lake Chad Basin region.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on Securitization Theory as developed by Buzan, Wœver, and de Wilde.[12] The theorists emphasize that security threats are socially and politically constructed rather than inherently objective conditions. Political actors use securitization to frame specific issues as existential dangers to core referent objects such as state sovereignty, territorial integrity, or

human security, thereby elevating them within public and institutional discourse. It should be noted that securitization operates not only as speech acts but also through institutional practices, policy routines, and power relations.[13] Floyd elaborates a normative critique, arguing that securitization should be evaluated according to whether it enhances or undermines human security.[14] These insights are particularly applicable in the Lake Chad conflicts, where securitization often becomes institutionalized via enduring counter-insurgency measures and cross-border military collaboration.

In this regard, securitization facilitates public and institutional acceptance of sustained emergency rule, counterinsurgency campaigns, and expanded security legislation in the Lake Chad region states. JAS is mostly seen as a violent armed group that harms society, leading to strong military actions. In contrast, ISWAP has gained legitimacy not only because of its violent actions, but also because of its ability to exert territorial control and connect with the global Islamic State network. This has produced a dual framing: domestically, ISWAP is seen as challenging state authority; and internationally as an extension of transnational jihadist networks.

From an operational point of view, this framework structured the coding as well as the comparative interpretation of the empirical data. The analysis is anchored on four components: the *referent object*, in which the entity offered as existentially threatened, whether state sovereignty, territorial integrity, or the human security of Lake Chad Basin communities; the *securitizing actor,* as in the state security apparatus, military commands, and allied political elites who spoken well about the threat and mobilize a response; the *audience*, the local populations, legislature, and international community whose acceptance allows for legitimate exceptional measures; and the *extraordinary measures*, the kind of emergency rule, counter-insurgency operations, and extended security legislation enacted once a securitizing move is accepted.[15] In respect to coding interview transcripts, both policy documents, and security reports statements were classified in conformity with which of these four elements they expressed. And which made it possible to track the referent object invoked (state versus community) and the audience addressed (domestic versus international) across sources. Also, this same scheme structured the comparison between JAS and ISWAP. This is because JAS is securitized primarily through a narrower referent object, that is to say state authority and public order, and addressed basically to a domestic audience. Dealing with the sect has depended largely on domestic military measures. ISWAP's securitization, by contrast, further invokes transnational referent objects as well as international audiences, producing extraordinary measures that blend domestic counter-insurgency with cross-border and multilateral security cooperation. The theory thus functioned not only as background context but also as the interpretive lens through which patterns of threat construction, actor behaviour, and policy response were identified and compared across the two cases in the Lake Chad Basin region.

Methods

The paper employed a qualitative comparative case study design to investigate the evolving security challenges associated with JAS and ISWAP in the Lake Chad Basin. A qualitative approach was deemed suitable for capturing human perceptions, organizational processes, governance issues, and lived experiences within a multifaceted conflict environment. The data generation entailed a total sample size of 111 respondents. The study collected primary data from 63 Key Informant Interviews (KII) **-** Nigeria 18, Cameroon 15, Chad 15, and Niger 15 and conducted eight Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with men and women groups of six people per group across the four countries.

A stratified purposive sampling strategy was employed to obtain perspectives from security officials, former or rehabilitated members of JAS and ISWAP, community leaders, residents of border and frontline communities, and humanitarian and peacebuilding practitioners. One of the eligibility for inclusion ensured that respondents meets at least one of the following criteria: lived for a very long time within a JAS/ISWAP-affected community, being directly vulnerable to or firsthand knowledge of a JAS/ISWAP-related activity, working in a relevant professional or official capacity as security, government official, humanitarian worker, or academician, or demonstrable knowledge of the security dynamics under investigation. Interviews took place in secure settings, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Ethical safeguards constituted a central component of the research process. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed, and risk mitigation measures were employed to avert retraumatization or compromise.

The number of KIIs from each country was determined based on relevancy and informativeness as opposed to numerical sameness in accordance with the requirements of qualitative research. In the case of Nigeria, there are more KIIs in that country considering the importance of that country in ISWAP's activities, as well as the significant attention of security agencies, humanitarian aid organizations, and experts. Moreover, for this study, eight FGDs have been conducted involving different groups of both men and women from the four countries with six people from each group, giving a total of 48 people. With the same FGD design in all the countries involved in the research, gender balance and cultural sensitivity have been ensured for this research. The chosen sample sizes and distributions were adequate and ethical for this study. Therefore, the tables below show the number of interviews conducted per respondent category.

Table 3.1: Number of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) by Respondent Type and Country

Table 3.1: Number of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) by Respondent Type and Country

Country	MNJTF Dev.	State Gov't	Comm.	Scholars	Subtotal
W/NGOs	Officials	Leaders			
Nigeria	3	4	3	4	4 18
Cameroon	3	3	3	3	3 15
Chad	3	3	3	3	3 15
Niger	3	3	3	3	3 15
Total	12	13	12	13	13 63

Table 3.2: Number of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) by Country and Group Type

Country	Men Group	Women Group
Nigeria	1 (6 men)	1 (6 women)
Cameroon	1 (6 men)	1 (6 women)
Chad	1 (6 men)	1 (6 women)
Niger	1 (6 men)	1 (6 women)
Total	4 (24 men)	4 (24 women)

Both KII and FGDs were done using participants' languages, which are Hausa and Kanuri. The audio recordings were then translated into English by professional translators fluent in the two languages and knowledgeable about conflict terms. For accuracy and consistency purposes, the translations were cross-checked by two translators, and differences were ironed out by consensus. The data collected were first transcribed and translated before they were subjected to thematic analysis. Audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher and a paid professional transcription service, after which transcripts were checked against the original recordings for accuracy prior to translation. The process made it easy to establish patterns, shared meanings, and differences among different countries and respondents. Coding was conducted manually through a thorough line-by-line reading, analysis and categorisation of the data. The interview transcripts were subsequently organised into codes, sub-themes and overarching themes aligned with the study's objectives, thereby enabling the systematic identification of patterns and facilitating cross-case comparison across the four countries.

5. Results

5.1 The Origins of JAS/ISWAP, Their Dissolution, and the Emerging Challenges

Both JAS and ISWAP originated from the same Salafi-jihadist movement. Following the 2009 uprising, however, the two groups developed distinct operational tactics, governance structures, and modes of engagement with local populations. JAS emerged between 2003 and 2004 under Muhammad Yusuf as a sectarian movement opposing Western education and governmental authority. Following the death of Yusuf, Abubakar Shekau took over the mantle of leadership of Boko Haram, under whose leadership the group experienced a resurgence, adopted terrorist tactics, and expanded its violence into other northern parts of Nigeria.[16] The Shekau-led faction subsequently became characterized by extensive violence, including forced recruitment, abductions, beheadings, suicide bombings, and attacks against civilians and military targets.[17] The 2016 split gave birth to ISWAP under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Barnawi, as a breakaway faction from Shekau's JAS. Studies link the split to Shekau's indiscriminate attacks on Muslim civilians and to attempts to establish a more structured, centralized command aligned with Islamic State protocols.[18]

5.2 Operational Strategies and Civilian Targeting

Each group's patterns of operation demonstrate differences in carrying out operations and acts of violence. JAS engages in largely indiscriminate violence, including suicide bombings, mass abductions, village raids, and infrastructure destruction. A religious leader clearly explained the situation:

> JAS attacks randomly hit everyone, including Muslims, Christians, mosques, and churches … they kidnap and frighten people.[19]

Travelling by road has become difficult, particularly across countries in the Lake Chad Basin due to escalation in insecurity. One community leader remarked:

> Since the beginning of the rainy season, there has been an increase in Boko Haram attacks in areas where people engage in farming and fishing. For example, to travel from Borno to Chad or Cameroon for business, you now have to pass through Adamawa or Taraba States.[20]

ISWAP, by contrast, directs its attacks primarily at military bases, supply trucks, and forward operating locations. Numerous respondents described ISWAP as showing relative restraint toward civilians, a perception reinforced by a repentant member during FGD:

> As long as you don't bother them, they won't bother you. Their goals are military members and security personnel.[21]

5.3 Recruitment, Coercion, and Population Control

Recruitment patterns also differ between the two groups. JAS mainly uses forceful methods to recruit people through the kidnapping of women and children. One participant from Diffa Region of Niger explained:

> Boko Haram recruited children and adult males using force whenever they attacked a village or a town. They gathered people and said who among you want to join us in this holy war against infidel. Some people join voluntarily but because of fear and those that show no interest are taken to the Sambisa Forest by force.[22]

ISWAP, on the other hand, employs a combination of coercion, economic incentives, and selective provision of incentives to enlist new recruits. Community members have noted that ISWAP gives out money, offers credits, and market participation to encourage voluntary membership. As one community member observed:

> They target poor youths with promises of money and a better life … sometimes they say it's a holy war, and many are convinced to join.[23]

5.4 Ideological Analysis, Civilian Relationships, and Regional Expansion

Although both factions adhere to Salafi-jihadist doctrine, they diverge significantly regarding their mode of operations. ISWAP restricts violence against Muslim civilians and reserves its violence against state security personnel and purported accomplices.[24] JAS, on the other hand, follows a strict belief that considers Muslims not in their group as traitors. In terms of treatment of abducted schoolgirls, ISWAP released the majority of the Dapchi girls, while JAS continued to detain the abducted Chibok girls. Following Shekau's demise in 2021, ISWAP infiltrated the Sambisa Forest and the Lake Chad islands, seizing control of resource-rich cross-border territories from Shekau's led faction.[25] Although both factions take advantage of porous frontiers, respondents and secondary sources indicate that ISWAP exhibits more effective cross-border coordination than JAS.

5.5 Lethality, Displacement, and the Evolution of Threats

Quantitative data reveal clear distinctions in terms of attack frequency and fatality patterns associated with JAS and ISWAP. Data show that JAS and ISWAP were both responsible for the the bulk of the 1,592 violent events and 4,850 fatalities recorded throughout the Lake Chad Basin in 2025, reflecting prolonged coordinated attacks and assaults on soldiers in northeast Nigeria alongside cross-border incidents in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.[26] With regards to casualties, ISWAP's individual attacks have often resulted to higher single-incident death tolls than JAS's, mirroring its comparatively larger-scale coordinated operations, though

cumulative annual fatalities for both sects have fluctuated significantly year to year.[27] For example, a JAS assault in Chad led to the death of almost 40 soldiers, demonstrating the group's continued capacity for lethal attacks despite de-escalated operational tempo.[28] Evidence indicates that JAS operations against ISWAP in the Lake Chad region in November 2025 caused between 50 and 200 reported casualties over six armed clashes, representing one of the deadliest inter-militant incidents since February 2023.[29] Beyond the casualty scale, the conflict has forced over 3.2 million people from their homes across the region.[30]

5.6 Military Responses and Community Engagement

The MNJTF has made progress in strategic operations, especially via cross-border coordination. Despite these achievements, respondents repeatedly emphasized that military gains remain fragile due to intelligence gaps, logistical constraints, and insufficient civilian protection mechanisms. A military officer stated:

> The government has made progress reclaiming territories … however, there remain vulnerabilities that enable the insurgents to reorganize.[31]

Community-oriented and religious initiatives emerged as significant non-violent methods to counteract extremist narratives and impede recruitment efforts. An imam in the region noted: We preach during Friday sermons that Islam does not support killing and violence.[32]

6. Discussion

This study uncovers the different paths JAS and ISWAP navigate in regards to their ideologies and operational modes. The findings corroborate existing literature showing the 2016 split as primarily shaping the evolution of the groups' violence. The study by Curiel, Walther, and O'Clery affirmed the Boko Haram split into factions active in the Lake Chad Island, including the Diffa region of Niger.[33] This is echoed by the International Crisis Group's findings that ISWAP rose due to Shekau's brutality.[34] This confluence is not surprising because both accounts trace the break to the same proximate cause, disagreement over the legitimate targets or treatment of Muslim civilians, rather than to divergent interpretations of jihadist doctrine as such. This suggests that, in contrast to narratives that treat the split as originally ideological, it is better understood as a leadership dispute over the legitimate limits of violence, with theology invoked later to justify positions already taken. In this regard, the finding upholds the fragmentation models of insurgency, which identify the drivers of factional splits in disputes over succession and organisational tension instead of ideological drift alone.

The study's findings in relation to operational behaviour and civilian targeting are consistent with earlier data on the two factions. Echoing Barnett's analysis, the study reveals that JAS has extended Shekau's strategy of indiscriminate attacks on innocent civilians of any faith.[35]

ISWAP focuses on military and governmental targets while generally avoiding indiscriminate attacks against Muslim non-combatants.[36] This divergence tracks both groups' competing sources of legitimacy and not a simple difference in capability. JAS's takfiri doctrine treats the entire non-adherent population, including Muslim and Christian alike, as legitimate targets. So indiscriminate violence is doctrinally consistent rather than a strategic error. ISWAP, by contrast, is pursuing a governance-building empire that relies on the Muslim populations' cooperation it seeks to control them, which makes constraint around that constituency a functional condition rather than a moral one. This aligns the findings with rebel governance scholarship, which contends that insurgent groups seeking to establish governance in territory tend to discipline violence against the local populations whose obedience sustains that control, while there is no equivalent constraint for insurgents that don't have such ambitions.

African Center for Strategic Studies reported a 7 per cent increase in JAS-ISWAP attacks, accounting for 3,982 fatalities.[37] Meanwhile, ISWAP's 'hearts and minds' strategy of providing social services such as water, clinics, and markets certainly yields conditional compliance. Ishaku, Aksit, and Maza similarly observe that ISWAP's quasi-state governance presents the group as a credible and just alternative to corrupt Nigerian governance.[38] The two findings are related rather than coexistent. In the absence of government in those region, there will be no drinking water, healthcare, and market access, and that gives ISWAP a bargaining chip that pure coercion cannot replicate. Locals weigh the cost of insurgent taxation against the cost of complete state neglect, and frequently find the former more endurable. This aligns with rebel governance theories as a form of social contract, in which authority is built through the exchange of protection and services for compliance, instead of because of violence alone. Similarly, it helps explain the rising attack figures. As ISWAP consolidates territorial control, the outcome of competition with JAS over population and resource control itself becomes a driver of continued and intensifying violence.

With regards to recruitment patterns, these findings are consistent with scholarly studies on both factions. Matfess's analysis of JAS's extremely coercive recruitment is affirmed by respondents' accounts of children being recruited and taken to insurgent training camps.[39] In contrast, ISWAP combines coercion with economic incentives, with Samuel's findings on ISWAP's governance and tax system confirming that large-scale fishermen and businessmen access ISWAP-controlled territory in exchange for economic incorporation.[40] This disagreement plausibly mirrors the resource base each sect commands rather than a difference in intent. JAS, weakened and scattered since 2016, has limited means to attract recruits and therefore depends on abduction and indoctrination of vulnerable children.

ISWAP's tax revenue and control of trade routes give it the means to offer paid incorporation to adults who retain some capacity to choose, even under duress. The pattern is consistent with the broader 'greed and grievance' literature on civil conflict, which proposes that access to economic resources shifts an armed group, including insurgents' recruitment strategy away from using force to incentive-based mobilisation, with implications for how each faction is probably to be countered. Economic disruption may signify more heavily

against ISWAP, while child-protection and rescue-oriented interventions remain more urgent for JAS.

Zenn noted Shekau's ideology of 'ultra-hardline takfiri' by declaring non-adherent Muslims renegades.[41] This rigid doctrine appears in actual behaviour: ISWAP released 105 of 111 Muslim girls abducted in Dapchi, keeping only Christian captives that refused to embrace Islam. JAS's faction refused to release the kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls, freeing only a few for ransom. The contrast is a direct behavioural expression of the doctrinal split described above. This is because ISWAP does not extend takfir to ordinary Muslim civilians, releasing Muslim captives costs it little and reinforces its claim to be a legitimate protector of Muslims. While on the contrary, JAS's denial to release Muslim Chibok girls is consistent with a doctrine that affords them no special protection. The incident thus demonstrates, at the level of a single event, the same mechanism the wider findings point to. Theology is not merely descriptive of each group's violence but equally functions as an operating rule that produces apparent distinct treatment of comparable situated civilians.

Dowyaro and Enwere explicitly apply securitization theory to the Boko Haram insurgency, demonstrating that the Nigerian government 'framed Boko Haram as an objective threat' to justify kinetic military counterinsurgency operations.[42] The findings also highlight that the insurgent groups themselves particularly JAS internally employ securitizing rhetoric, evidenced in Shekau's takfir speech acts that cast whole swathes of non-compliant Muslims as 'existential' enemies of JAS, legitimizing terror against Muslim populations. This represents a bottom-up form of securitization not often emphasized in the literature.[43] From theoretical point of view, the distinction matters because the Copenhagen School's original formulation locates the securitizing move with the state, treating the referent object of security as something acted upon rather than as an actor in its own right. Evidence that an insurgent group accomplish its own securitizing speech acts against a rival population indicates that securitization can occur simultaneously at multiple, competing levels within the same conflict. Accordingly, state and insurgent narratives are better analysed as parallel securitization processes than as a single official framing that non-state actors simply react to.

This complexity adds further depth to securitization theory, suggesting that reducing a conflict to a solely 'speech act' or state narrative is deficient. It also emphasizes the criticism of overly militarized counterterrorism and counterinsurgency policy as part of securitization that labelling insurgency as the greatest threat can result in state policy ignoring key local issues such as political, economic, and social gaps.[44] From a policy perspective, the significance of blending military and non-military approaches is reaffirmed. Barnett's finding that military offensive have continuously driven insurgents out of smaller towns and villages, although such gains have often been short-lived, only for them to regroup as observed in Sambisa and Lake Chad, echoes respondents' concerns about the tenuousness of military gains.[45]

The findings highlight local initiatives such as preaching, dialogue, and reconciliation as prominently featured in interview responses, aligning with several studies documenting the

role of faith-based organizations in preaching peace, counter-radicalization, promoting mutual trust, and actively countering extremist teachings.[46] A credible explanation for this convergence is that religious leaders retain a form of authority in Northeast Nigeria and Lake Chad region in general that neither the state nor the insurgent groups can easily claim. Residents considered them as internal to the community rather than as an external actor with a security or political agenda. Preaching and dialogue initiatives are consequently able to rebuild the interpersonal trust that indiscriminate violence and securitizing rhetoric destroy; which is a resource that military kinetic approaches alone cannot generate. This suggests that the peacebuilding value of faith-based actors lies less in the specific content of their message than in their standing as trusted, non-coercive interlocutors within the conflict-affected communities.

Conclusion

These findings indicate a single underlying dynamic rather than a list of separate contrasts. JAS's exclusionary takfiri doctrine and ISWAP's territorial control/state-building ambitions are not independent traits but two coherent, self-reinforcing strategies for pursuing legitimacy under conditions of state absence. One built on doctrinal purity and coercion, the other on selective restraint and governance. This has three implications for theory. First, it qualifies fragmentation models of insurgency by showing that a split precipitated by a leadership contestation can however harden into two different and durable models of legitimacy, rather than dissolving into disorganised violence. Second, it extends rebel governance theory further than its conventional focus on service provision to show that restraint in applying violence is itself a governance instrument. Third, it qualifies securitization theory by showing that insurgent sects are not merely objects of state securitizing discourse but can themselves author competing securitizing narratives towards civilian populations. Practically, this reframing suggests that counterinsurgency strategies calibrated to JAS, where kinetic measures address a doctrinally driven threat, are improbably to be also effective against ISWAP, where the group's continuation rests on contested governance and would be better addressed by measures that compete for the same legitimacy ISWAP seeks to build.

ENDNOTES

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