

The evolution of jihadi organisations in Africa since 2020

Executive summary

Olivier Milland

This is an executive summary of the report FOI-R--5871--SE “The evolution of jihadi organisations in Africa since 2020: Cases from the Lake Chad basin, the Sahel region, and Somalia”.

AS THIS REPORT shows, the global jihadist landscape has undergone significant changes over the past five years. Nowhere is this more evident than in Africa – the world’s epicentre for jihadist violence. Since the beginning of the decade, the vast majority of attacks and fatalities globally have been concentrated in African countries, in particular in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, but also Nigeria and Somalia. Although global jihadist brands such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State are facing significant attrition in their historical heartlands in the Middle East and Central Asia, they are flourishing in some parts of Africa. African jihadists now occupy increasingly senior roles within both al-Qaeda and Islamic State organisations, and African branches feature extensively in global jihadist propaganda. This expansion of jihadist violence and influence in Africa comes against the backdrop of withdrawn and scaled-down multilateral military operations in some of these countries, at the same time as most European countries are prioritising the defence of their homelands and Ukraine against Russian aggression.

The report makes three broad conclusions. Firstly, not only do Africa-based groups account for the largest share of jihadist attacks and related fatalities worldwide, they are also expanding their areas of operations, enhancing their fighting capacities, improving their capabilities, and replacing formal and informal local governance structures with their own systems. Secondly, Africa-based jihadist organisations remain dynamic, resilient and adaptable to changing security and geopolitical environments. Thirdly, although these organisations adhere to global jihadist brands and doctrines,

they continue to be shaped and driven by their own local dynamics which is highlighted by the three cases: the Lake Chad basin and Nigeria, the Sahel, and Somalia. Consequently, their organisational trajectories and operational profiles differ significantly. Among the factors that determine the trajectory of these organisations are their zones of operations, capacities, capabilities, leadership structure, governance system, and financing. While ideology is an important aspect of jihadist organisations, it is not the only driver. Although these organisations are part of intrinsically fundamentalist jihadist ideologies, their leadership also demonstrates a high level of strategic thinking, adaptability, and pragmatism.

Case 1: The Lake Chad basin and Nigeria

In the Lake Chad basin and northwestern Nigeria, several jihadist groups continue to operate and destabilise the state. While most of these groups stem from the insurgency commonly referred to as “Boko Haram,” the various splinters and factions have evolved in very different ways. Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), which is present in the northeastern state of Borno and neighbouring regions, poses the most extensive threat to the Nigerian state and regional stability. Since the beginning of the decade, the organisation has sought to rationalise its bureaucracy and governance system, signalling its growing ambition and capability to rival the Nigerian state in remote rural areas of the Lake Chad basin. Furthermore, ISWAP has ramped up its kinetic capabilities, launching complex attacks on Nigerian military bases, and has significantly boosted its ranks in recent years. There are also mounting signs

of cooperation with Islamic State in the Sahel Province (ISSP) which has its stronghold in the tri-border Liptako–Gourma area between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Meanwhile, ISWAP remains at war with *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (JAS). Meanwhile, JAS has split into at least three different factions, operating in the Lake Chad basin and in north-central Nigeria, where it coexists with various so-called bandit gangs. *Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis-Sudan* (Ansaru) – a third group originating in the Boko Haram insurgency – has reactivated and is cooperating with *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM), which is based in the Sahel. However, its activities have so far been very limited.

Case 2: The Sahel

In the Sahel, the security situation remains extremely complex due to the presence of various non-state armed groups, repressive military regimes, Russia's Africa Corps, and major jihadist organisations such as JNIM and ISSP. JNIM has expanded its area of operations steadily over the past decade, but the pace has accelerated since 2020. Beyond JNIM's historical heartlands in northern and central Mali, its areas of operations extend far south and southeast into Burkina Faso, as well as Togo and Benin, and west towards the Malian border with Senegal. In November 2025, it also claimed its first attack in Nigeria. Taking advantage of the human rights abuses committed by state security forces and Russian mercenaries, JNIM has also sought to position itself as a relevant governance actor and protector of local communities. It has scaled up its economic warfare through the imposition of blockades on various cities, including the Malian capital, Bamako. Its most significant threat now comes from within due to its rapid growth and consequent cohesion challenges, as well as

ISSP, with which it has been at war since 2019. ISSP has also become entrenched in the Liptako–Gourma area and has been able to expand into new areas, including southern Niger and northwestern Nigeria, despite the war with JNIM and Sahelian security forces. In February 2026, it staged its most spectacular attack yet, when it conducted a complex attack on the international airport in the Nigerian capital, Niamey.

Case 3: Somalia

In Somalia, *Harakat al-Mujahideen al-Shabaab* (al-Shabaab) remained the most serious threat to regional security and Somali state stability. Al-Shabaab continues to control large areas in central and southern Somalia and to demonstrate an ability to strike high-profile targets within the capital, Mogadishu. Since the beginning of the decade, al-Shabaab has boosted its ranks and capabilities, likely thanks to increased cooperation with Islamist non-state armed groups in Yemen, signalling a growing threat to navigation in the Gulf of Aden. Meanwhile, Islamic State in Somalia Province (ISS) faced significant attrition in 2025 after a period of strengthening, thanks in part to a marked increase in the number of foreign fighters among its ranks. Despite the setbacks, the group has demonstrated resilience in the past, meaning that efforts to cut off its financing streams and foreign recruits will need to be maintained.

Taken together, these trends signal a worrying deterioration in various African countries. This dynamic will almost certainly have consequences for European and Swedish security in the medium term. Therefore, more efforts are needed to monitor and assess this threat in order to maintain a nuanced and informed understanding. ■

Olivier Milland, MA in International Relations, is an analyst at FOI's Programme for Studies in African Security.