



The evolution of jihadi organisations in Africa since 2020

Cases from the Lake Chad basin, the Sahel region, and Somalia

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Cover: Photo by Audu Marte / AFP. A vehicle allegedly belonging to the Islamic State group in West Africa (ISWAP) is seen in Baga on August 2, 2019.

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Sammanfattning

Den här rapporten analyserar jihadistiska organisationers utveckling i Tchadsjö-regionen, Sahel och Somalia sedan 2020. Rapporten identifierar bredare trender som belysts i rapporter av FN:s expertgrupp mellan januari 2020 och februari 2026. Som rapporten visar står dessa grupper nu för den största andelen attacker och dödsfall som kan kopplas till jihadistiska grupper världen över. Detta märks genom gruppernas växande verkansområden, förbättrade stridskapacitet och stridsförmågor, samt stärkta styrningsstrukturer. Trots att de Afrikabaserade jihadistiska organisationerna som diskuteras i rapporten i stor utsträckning är kopplade till globala nätverk som al-Qaeda och Islamiska staten så förblir de färgade av sina egna miljöer vilket påverkar deras respektive utveckling. Att jämföra väpnade uppror i tre olika afrikanska regioner ger en inblick i hur jihadistiska uppror artar sig i allmänhet, men framförallt i Afrika. Även om lokalsamhällen och länderna där dessa grupper verkar förblir de värst drabbade så påverkas Europa på flera sätt. Till exempel genom ökad migration, politisk ovisshet och regeringsinstabilitet som påverkar internationella relationer.

Nyckelord: jihad, Qaeda, Islamiska staten, Tchadsjön, Sahel, Somalia, Boko Haram, Shabaab, JNIM, ISWAP, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, kontraterrorism, säkerhetspolitik

Summary

This report analyses the evolution of jihadist organisations in the Lake Chad basin, the Sahel region, and Somalia since 2020. The report identifies major trends highlighted in the semestrial reports the UN Security Council's panel of experts between January 2020 and February 2026. As the report shows, these groups now account for the largest share of jihadist attacks and related fatalities worldwide. This is highlighted by an expansion of the jihadist groups' areas of operations, enhanced fighting capacities, improved capabilities, and strengthened governance structures. Even though the Africa-based jihadist organisations discussed largely remain linked to global jihadist brands such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State, they are very much coloured by their surrounding environments, which affects their respective trajectories. Comparing insurgencies across three different regions gives insights into the nature of jihadist insurgencies more generally and the major developments in Africa, in particular. Although local communities and countries in these regions are those most affected by this phenomenon, there are several implications also for Europe, including increased migration, political uncertainty, and government instability affecting international relations.

Keywords: jihadi, Qaeda, Islamic State, Lake Chad, Sahel, Somalia, Boko Haram, Shabaab, JNIM, ISWAP, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, counterterrorism, security policy

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Abbreviations

Ansaru	Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa (<i>Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis-Sudan, Ansaru</i>)
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AS	The Mujahideen Youth Movement (<i>Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, al-Shabaab</i>)
ASJ	People of the [Islamic] Tradition and the Community (<i>Ahlu al-Sunnah wal-Jamaah</i>)
FGS	Federal government of Somalia
FMS	Federal member states
GDP	General Directorate of Provinces
GIA	Armed Islamic Group (<i>Groupe Islamique Armé</i>)
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (<i>Groupe salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat</i>)
ICU	Islamic Courts Union
IED	Improvised explosive device
IS	Islamic State
ISCAP	Islamic State in Central Africa Province
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (2015–19)
ISIL/ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/ Syria/al-Sham
ISS	Islamic State in Somalia
ISSP	Islamic State in Sahel Province (2022–present)
ISWAP	Islamic State in West Africa Province
JAS	People of the [Islamic] Tradition for Preaching and Jihad (<i>Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li al-Da'wa wa al-Jihad</i>)
JNIM	Support Group for Islam and Muslims (<i>Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin</i>)
SNA	Somali National Army
UAVs	Uncrewed aerial vehicles

List of key persons and their affiliations

The names, positions, and affiliations are those compiled by the author as of February 2026.

Abdelmalek Droukdel	The founding leader of AQIM †
Abdulqadir Mumin al-Somali	The founding and current leader of ISS
Abubakar Shekau	The second leader of “Boko Haram” and founder of JAS and ISWAP †
Abu Aba al-Bara al-Sahrawi (<i>nom de guerre</i>)	The current leader of ISSP
Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (<i>nom de guerre</i>)	The first self-proclaimed caliph of ISIL
Abu Bakar ibn Muhammad ibn Ali al-Mainuki (also spelled Mainok)	The current leader of al-Furqan and the potential head of the General Directorate of Provinces
Abu Musa al-Mangawi (<i>nom de guerre</i> ; given name Ba’a Shuwa)	The current leader of ISWAP
Abu Musab al-Barnawi (<i>nom de guerre</i> ; given name Habib Yusuf)	A prominent senior leader of ISWAP and al-Furqan. Unclear whether alive or dead.
Abu Ubaidah Youssef al-Annabi (<i>nom de guerre</i>)	The current leader of AQIM
Abu Musab al-Zarqawi	The founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq †
Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi (<i>nom de guerre</i>)	The founding leader of ISGS †
Amadou Kouffa (<i>nom de guerre</i>)	The leader of Mantiqa Macina and second-in-command of JNIM
Abu Ubaidah (<i>nom de guerre</i> ; given name Ahmed Diriye)	The leader of al-Shabaab as of 2025
Ayman al-Zawahiri	The second leader of al-Qaeda †
Iyad Ag Ghaly	The founder and apex leader of JNIM
Mohamed Yusuf	The founder of “Boko Haram” †
Saif al-Adl (<i>nom de guerre</i>)	The presumed current leader of al-Qaeda
Usama ben Laden (also spelled Osama bin Laden)	The founder of al-Qaeda †

† Deceased.

1 Introduction

The global jihadi landscape has undergone significant changes over the past decade. Three of these changes are worth highlighting at the outset. Firstly, global jihadist networks such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) have suffered ostensibly insurmountable attrition in their historical strongholds in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia. Both al-Qaeda and IS now operate decentralised governance models in which their respective regional affiliates have grown in importance. While al-Qaeda has been operating through this networked approach of various regional branches and affiliates for more than a decade, the importance of its African branches has grown during the past five years. By the same token, IS established its so-called General Directorate of Provinces (GDP) in 2019, replacing the Administration of Distant Provinces that had been in place since at least 2015 and which was responsible for managing its so-called *wilayat* (provinces) outside of Iraq and Syria. Since the beginning of this decade, the GDP's role within the IS core organisation appears to have grown as its *wilayat* have accounted for most of its kinetic activities. All these provinces are now considered on par with each other from a hierarchical standpoint.¹

Secondly, several prominent leaders have been killed. In October 2019, US forces killed ISIS's first self-proclaimed caliph and founder, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, about six months after the so-called caliphate had lost control of its last bastion in Syria.² Most of his successors have subsequently been killed, severely hampering the organisation's top-down command-and-control. In the same vein, al-Qaeda's apex leader since 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was killed in a US drone strike in July 2022.³

Following a similar trend, key Africa-based jihadist leaders have also been killed in recent years. In 2020, the founding leader of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Abdelmalek Droukdel, was killed in a French military operation.⁴ Abubakar Shekau, the founder of *Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li al-Da'wa wa al-Jihad* (hereafter JAS), a faction of the so-called "Boko Haram" insurgency, killed himself in 2021 amid fighting between JAS and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). Also in 2021, the leader of what is now referred to as Islamic State in Sahel Province (ISSP), Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, was killed by a French drone strike.⁵ However, both al-Qaeda and IS Central have proved resilient. Just as the deaths of Usama ben Laden in 2011 and al-Baghdadi in 2019 did not end al-Qaeda or Islamic State, Africa-based franchises have outlived their historical leaders in a similar fashion.

This leads us to the third change: the al-Qaeda- and IS-franchises have expanded enormously in Sub-Saharan Africa, which has become the world's epicentre for jihadist activity. In 2025, the region accounted for the vast majority of fatalities caused by jihadist attacks worldwide.⁶ And the cumulative number of deaths that can be linked to jihadist groups in Africa since 2015 is estimated to have reached 150,000, half of which occurred since 2021, indicating a marked escalation in the lethality of attacks.⁷ The Sahel, Somalia, the Lake Chad basin, and Nigeria account for the lion's share of these deaths.

Furthermore, there is anecdotal evidence that African territories are being used by IS-linked networks to plan or carry out attacks in Europe and elsewhere. In July 2024, an IS-

¹ Tore Hamming, "The General Directorate of Provinces: Managing the Islamic State's Global Network," July 2023, CTCT Sentinel, vol.16, no.7, pp. 20–27; Aaron Y. Zelin, "A Globally Integrated Islamic State," 15 July 2024, War on the Rocks.

² US Department of War, "U.S. Forces Kill ISIS Founder, Leader Baghdadi in Syria," 27 October 2019.

³ Robert Plummer and Matt Murphy, "Ayman al-Zawahiri: Al-Qaeda leader killed in US drone strike," 2 August 2022, BBC News.

⁴ John Campbell, "French-Led Decapitation Strike on AQIM in Mali," 9 June 2020, Council of Foreign Relations.

⁵ Tom Wheeldon, "Sahrawi: The top Sahel jihadist killed in French 'opportunistic hit,'" France 24, 16 September 2021.

⁶ Africa Confidential, "Jihadist fighters advance as governments stall," 10 October 2025.

⁷ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Africa Surpasses 150,000 Deaths Linked to Militant Islamist Groups in Past Decade," 28 July 2025.

linked network was reportedly dismantled after several Iraqis and Syrians had been arrested in Côte d'Ivoire and Madagascar.⁸ In February 2025, Moroccan officials arrested a dozen people suspected of being ISSP members who were planning attacks in the country.⁹ Africa-based IS branches are also trying to attract sympathisers far outside their strongholds, including in Sweden.¹⁰

As such, the UN Sanctions Monitoring Team for [Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, (ISIL)] and al-Qaeda has contended that “the African branches of [al Qaeda and Islamic State] are now playing a critical role despite their growing autonomy” in the global jihadi landscape.¹¹ The panel has also assessed that “a shift in gravity of the ISIL core” away from Iraq or Syria was most likely to pivot towards Africa, continuing a trend of “more devolution and autonomy.”¹² The Sahel-based *Jam'at Nusrat al-Islam wul-Muslimin* (Group to Support Islam and Muslims, hereafter JNIM) and the Somalia-based *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen* (known as al-Shabaab) are two of the four deadliest groups in the world.¹³ By the same token, the most active IS-affiliate is ISWAP which is active in the Lake Chad basin. During 2024 and 2025, speculation was also rife that Abdulqadir Mumin, the leader of the Somalia-based branch Islamic State in Somalia, was the group's global head.¹⁴

This trend of expanding jihadist threat in Africa comes against the backdrop of three parallel developments in the region's security architecture. Firstly, Western and multilateral counterterrorism operations have ended or are closing across these regions. Consequently, Western military presence and capabilities have declined due to the shuttering of military bases, particularly in West Africa. Secondly, European attention to countering jihadi violence more broadly appears to be falling as security needs at home take priority following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and mounting geopolitical rivalry between the US and China. Finally, donor fatigue and a global reduction in overseas development support for those multilateral stabilisation and training missions still in place have led to funding and capacity gaps, which reduce their effectiveness and the likely durability of their impact.

1.1 Research question and design

Given the above-mentioned, this study seeks to better understand the implications of these developments by taking stock of the main dynamics in three African conflict theatres since the beginning of the decade. As such, the research question driving this research is: *How have jihadist organisations in the Lake Chad basin, the Sahel region, and Somalia evolved during the early 2020s?*

In order to answer this question, the analysis highlights a set of factors that help identify change over time. Among others, these include the fighting capacity of these groups, their areas of operations, their modus operandi, their ambition to govern, and their ties to al-Qaeda and Islamic State. These factors are combined into an analytical matrix, presented in Annex 2. By answering the research question, the study aims to contribute to the

⁸ Benjamin Roger, “Un réseau de l'organisation Etat islamique qui voulait rallier l'Europe démantelé en Côte d'Ivoire et à Madagascar,” 24 November 2024, *Le Monde*.

⁹ Jassim Ahdani, “Au Maroc, un projet terroriste de grande envergure déjoué,” *Jeune Afrique*, 19 February 2025.

¹⁰ SVT, “Grannarna skärrade efter Säpos tillslag i Tyresö,” 8 March 2024.

¹¹ UN Security Council (UNSC), “Thirty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” 25 July 2023, p. 9.

¹² UNSC, “Thirty-third report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” 29 January 2024, p. 5.

¹³ Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), “Global Terrorism Index 2025,” March 2025, p. 4.

¹⁴ UNSC, “Thirty-fifth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” 6 February 2025.

continued understanding of the jihadist threat in general, and within the Sub-Saharan African context in particular. In addition, the concluding remarks also advance some implications this can have for Europe.

The report describes the evolution of jihadist groups by looking at three cases: the Lake Chad basin region, the Sahel, and Somalia.¹⁵ These cases have been chosen because they are the most affected regions in Africa in terms of fatalities. This does not diminish the detrimental human impact of jihadist insurgencies in other parts of the region, including in North Africa, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, or northern Mozambique, or any other types of violence that occur across the continent. Each of these three case studies has a dedicated chapter describing its jihadist landscape and trajectory. Each chapter is structured into sections that focus on one specific jihadist organisation. Each section largely follows the same structure and is divided into subsections that: 1) set out the group's background and origins; 2) describe the main dynamics and trends that have affected it since 2020; and 3) outline its relationship with its core organisations, al-Qaeda and Islamic State.

This study provides an overview of the main developments in jihadist violence across Sub-Saharan Africa's three main hotspots in recent years. Indeed, understanding this is important, as the expansion of jihadist violence in Africa is inextricably linked to other geopolitical developments observed in the region over the past five to ten years. Furthermore, renowned expert on jihadist organisations Aaron Zelin points out, when discussing the evolution of the global IS architecture, there has often been a tendency to study distinct provinces, rather than describing the overarching organisation and its presence in various provinces and how they connect to one another.¹⁶ This is not dissimilar to the study of jihadist organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa, where experts often tend to focus on one particular region. Hence, this study aims to bridge part of this knowledge gap and provide the basis for future comparative studies, for instance by identifying potential patterns, similarities, and differences between these groups and their developments in recent years. This study may therefore inform public policy debates and is targeted at policymakers, academia, the media, and anyone interested in understanding the dynamics of jihadist organisations in general. Further studies will invariably be needed to maintain comprehensive knowledge of these groups, as they remain dynamic and adaptable to changing political environments. In line with Zelin's argument, failing to continue to monitor these evolving threats, or continuing to analyse IS through the lens of its previous versions, may lead to misinterpretations or outright lapses in identifying emerging trends and threats as well as poorly formulated policies.¹⁷

1.2 Methodology

The study uses text analysis as its main method and draws upon the semestrial reports of the UN Security Council's Sanctions Monitoring group on ISIL and al-Qaeda since 2020 as an empirical core. Although the timeframe for the analysis is 2020 to February 2026, it also includes significant events or changes that occurred before 2020, without which developments over the last five years cannot be fully understood. The analysis is further enhanced by specialist or academic texts, focusing on specific aspects of these

¹⁵ The definition of the Lake Chad basin is used loosely in this study, given that groups historically based in the region have expanded or, in particular, moved to other parts of western Nigeria. The Sahel, or Sahelian strip, is a biogeographical zone that stretches from Mauritania in the west to Eritrea and Sudan in the east. "Sahel" derives from the Arabic word meaning "coast" or "shore" and describes the border regions between the harsh climate in the Sahara Desert and the tropical climate in Sub-Saharan Africa. In recent years, "the Sahel" is increasingly used to describe a region in West Africa, primarily comprising Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In this report, "Sahel" primarily refers to this region. However, given that there is no clear border for where the biogeographical Sahel begins or ends, the northern parts of the coastal West African states may also be included in the Sahel writ large.

¹⁶ Zelin, "A Globally Integrated Islamic State."

¹⁷ Ibid.

insurgencies, as well as nine interviews of experts completed between October and November 2025.

While various jihadist non-state armed actors are active in Africa, this report focuses on the following six groups operating in the three abovementioned theatres:

- Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, al-Shabaab (hereafter al-Shabaab)
- Jama'at Ahl Sunna li al-Da'wa wa al-Jihad (JAS)
- Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)
- Islamic State in Sahel Province (ISSP)
- Islamic State in Somalia (ISS)
- Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP).

Some names alternate throughout the text to reflect the organisation's status in a given period. For instance, ISSP was not considered an IS province in its own right until 2022 (see Section 1.3). Accordingly, the report also describes the group by period, reflecting its relationship with the IS core: Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (2015–19) and the ISWAP-Sahel branch (2019–22). "ISSP" is used for the period from 2022 until present.

Other jihadist groups active elsewhere in Africa were not included in this study due to their comparatively low number of fatalities.¹⁸ Among others, the following groups are excluded: Islamic State in Libya, *Ansar Bait al-Maqdis* (also known as Islamic State Sinai Province, ABM), Islamic State Central Africa Province (also known as Allied Democratic Forces and *Madina at Tauheed Wau Mujahideen*), and *Ahlu al-Sunnah wal Jama'a* (also known as Islamic State in Mozambique, ASJ).

Studying clandestine and opaque jihadist organisations in these regions through open sources and at a distance has several limitations. The most obvious is the language barrier and lack of direct access to first-hand sources. It is with this in mind that the text analysis of secondary sources was chosen as the preferred method. Furthermore, the reports by UN Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team were deemed the most suitable empirical core for this report, thanks to their broad focus on ISIL and al-Qaeda and regional breakdowns, as well as their regularity in reporting. As such, the reports produce useful snapshots of major developments in the periods they cover. Moreover, the group of experts tends to be composed of ten renowned counter-terrorism experts from various countries, who are recruited centrally by the UN which could minimise bias based on national preferences. However, the semestrial reports are arguably, in themselves, biased products of careful compromises among the permanent members of the Security Council. For instance, although the so-called Wagner group has been present in Mali since late 2021, it is mentioned only once in these reports (in the *Thirty-third report*).¹⁹ Africa Corps, which arrived in 2023 and has since replaced Wagner, is not mentioned at all. Despite this, the reports still contain observable patterns and trends that can be further nuanced through other secondary sources and expert interviews. The thorough editing and review processes which the reports undergo before being published are also a testament to their high empirical value and reliability. Where member states disagree, the sanctions monitoring team tends to report this, which is also reflected in this report.

Finally, the report uses maps for each of the theatres discussed. These maps are solely intended to help the reader situate the presence of each group within its operating region. They are by no means exhaustive and should not be interpreted as such. In addition, the highlighted areas do not necessarily reflect a uniform presence by the respective groups. Rather, they are included to highlight areas where there is a confirmed presence, either through reported attacks or other activities. The reader is also reminded that these maps are snapshots of a given timeframe and do not indicate the presence of jihadist groups in the future.

¹⁸ Global Terrorism Index 2025

¹⁹ UNSC, "Thirty-third report," p. 10.

1.3 Al Qaeda vs. Islamic State

While the report describes the main developments in relation to the most active jihadist groups in Africa, it is important to note their connection and interaction with other global jihadist networks and phenomena. As such, references to al-Qaeda and Islamic State are made throughout this report. However, in order to help the reader along the way it is important to give some background on what these two jihadist brands entail, how they relate to each other, and what sets them apart.

Al Qaeda and Islamic State are two jihadist militant brands that have come to dominate much of the jihadist landscape over the past 20 to 30 years. The two networks share a common enmity with what they perceive to be an imperialist threat, in particular Western, Christian, or Jewish, and with Western values such as democracy and capitalism. Both organisations pursue the ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic state, governed by one global leader responsible for all Muslims. Both groups have sought to establish a presence across the world. However, the two organisations diverge in their historical trajectories, respective ideologies, modus operandi, methods to achieve their shared goals, and they are effectively at war with each other.

Al Qaeda was born in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan of 1979–89, when Usama ben Laden sought to organise jihadist fighters, who had travelled to the Central Asian country from across the Muslim world, to support the US-backed Afghan insurgency.²⁰ Following the First Gulf War (1990–91), when Saudi Arabia allowed the stationing of US forces in-country, ben Laden's and al-Qaeda's attention turned to combatting what they perceived to be American imperialism after the end of the Cold War. The group rose to infamy during the late 1990s and early 2000s with, among other attacks, the twin-bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the 9/11 attacks in New York City and Arlington County in 2001. The latter attack effectively triggered the US's war on terror, leading to military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively in 2001 and 2003, and various other targeted US operations. Al-Qaeda's core leadership has been significantly weakened due to US operations killing ben Laden (in 2011) and his successor, al-Zawahiri (in 2022). Its current leader is believed to be Saif al-Adl, a long-time jihadist fighter whose exact whereabouts were unconfirmed in recent UN panel of experts' reports but who is presumed to have operated out of Iran for several years.²¹ However, the group remains active through a network of branches and affiliates who operate across the world.

It was in the context of the 2003 invasion of Iraq that the seeds of what was to become Islamic State came to grow. One year after the US invasion, the Palestino-Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi led the organisation he founded, *Jamaat Tawhid wal Jihad*, to join al-Qaeda as its first Iraqi branch, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), in 2004.²² Unlike ben Laden's al-Qaeda, which sought to unify jihadist fighters in a global campaign against the US, al-Zarqawi's Sunni-dominated group sought to conduct a sectarian war against the Shia community and its allies in Iraq and the Middle East. Al-Zarqawi was killed in a US operation in 2006. He was replaced by Abu Ayyub al-Masri (also known as Abu Hamza al-Muhajir), who implemented al-Zarqawi's plan to proclaim an Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) that same year, and anointed Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as its leader.²³ Both al-Masri and al-Baghdadi were killed during a US-Iraqi operation in 2010, and were succeeded by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. By this time, the group had been seriously weakened. But the 2011

²⁰ US Congressional Research Service, "Al Qaeda: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy," 6 May 2026.

²¹ UNSC, "Thirty-second report," p. 16; Colin P. Clarke and Clara Broecker, "The Global State of al-Qaeda 24 Years After 9/11," September 2025, *CTC Sentinel*, vol.18, no. 9, pp. 20–31.

²² Katarzyna Jasko et al., "ISIS. Its History, Ideology, and Psychology," in Ronald Lukens-Bull and Mark Woodward, *Handbook of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Lives*, 2018, pp. 1089–1113.

²³ The identity of Abu Omar has been a subject of debate and speculation. US intelligence claimed for some time that Abu Omar was a fictional character, created by al-Masri to mask that he, an Egyptian and not an Iraqi, was leading AQI. However, this claim has subsequently been debunked; Bill Roggio, "Who is Abu Omar al-Baghdadi?" *Long War Journal*, 14 September 2008.

Arab Spring and outbreak of civil war in Syria would provide a new opportunity for the group to grow.

In 2013 the group changed its name to ISIL after expanding into Syria, through the absorption of local militant groups.²⁴ Throughout 2013 and 2014, ISIL expanded its operations and control of Iraqi and Syrian areas, culminating in al-Baghdadi's declaration of the caliphate at the grand mosque of Mosul in 2014. Beyond taking over large swathes of land in Iraq and Syria during the 2014–17 period, ISIS became infamous through its gruesome execution videos, including of several Western nationals, as well as its recruitment of militants from across the world and its conduct of several high-impact attacks throughout Europe during the same period.²⁵ Although the core organisation has lost all of its previously held territory in Iraq and Syria, the brand remains active through several so-called provinces operating across the world.

1.3.1 Commonalities and differences

Al Qaeda and Islamic State share Salafist ideas which see religion and state as inseparable, and both groups strive for the establishment of a global Islamist state based on strict interpretation of Sharia that is led by one leader. However, the two groups differ in how and when to achieve this objective, in particular in the methodology used (*Manhaj*) and creed (*Aqidah*) adhered to. As Jasko et al. explain, “the core dispute between [al-Qaeda] and ISIS focused on ISIS's excessive use of *takfir* (excommunication; see Section 1.4), the proper way to establish the caliphate, and the use of End-times narratives.”²⁶ Some of these divisions can be traced back to the early days of AQI and the first meeting between al-Zarqawi and ben Laden, with the latter allegedly being offended by the former's radical views on killing Muslims, in particular Shia Muslims, whom he considered apostates.²⁷ This interpretation of *takfir* continued under subsequent ISIS leaders, and a 2016 doctrinal document clarifies that *takfir* extends to anyone straying from ISIS's strict ideology; that is, those who embrace “democracy and secularism, and all governments that do not rule by sharia (Islamic law), are deemed *kafir* or apostate, which legitimises their killing.”²⁸ Al-Qaeda leaders, however, have long deemed this interpretation too radical.

Another point of contention is the way in which the caliphate should be established. While both organisations want to establish a temporal caliphate, they differ in how this should be achieved. ISIS saw the establishment of the caliphate as a central pillar to its struggle, tapping into eschatological narratives and prophecies of “the ultimate fight between forces of good in Syria—a prelude to the anticipated Yaumul Qiyamah (end of time).”²⁹ In other words, the group interpreted the outbreak of civil war in Syria as the moment to wage this “ultimate fight.” Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, saw the establishment of a caliphate as a distant goal that should be pursued only when it had won popular support among Muslims. Al-Qaeda also sought to rid itself from its enemies first, i.e., the US and other allied states, before establishing a state. These ideological and methodological differences, thus, explain why al-Qaeda was and still is more interested in spectacular attacks on US and Western targets in distant regions, while ISIS was more interested in conducting attacks and conquering territory in its homeland. This is not to say that ISIS has not carried out spectacular attacks outside its heartlands, including in Europe, or that groups affiliated

²⁴ ISIL also attempted to absorb the militant group Jabhat al-Nusra, led by the jihadist fighter Abu Mohamed al Jawlani (today known as Ahmed al Sharaa and president of Syria). However, al-Jawlani refused and swore allegiance to then-al Qaeda-leader al-Zawahiri.

²⁵ Not all attacks in Europe during this time were planned and executed by ISIL, but there is clear evidence that the group was responsible for the 2016 suicide bombing at Brussels international airport and the complex attacks in Paris. Other attacks in Europe during and after this period have also been claimed by ISIL, although they were likely committed by so-called lone-wolf sympathisers or individuals, with little involvement from the ISIL central leadership.

²⁶ Jasko, “ISIS. Its History,” pp. 1089–1113.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 1102.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 1104.

with al-Qaeda are not interested in controlling territory, but rather that these were not their core objectives at the outset.

Another common point is the two brands' use of and reliance on so-called branches, affiliated groups, or wilayat. Al-Qaeda began its "branching-out strategy" in 2003 with the establishment of AQI.³⁰ By that time, al-Qaeda had been severely pushed back, and ben Laden had largely gone into hiding. Four years later it established its first African branch, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, see Chapter 3), in Algeria.³¹ However, it is important to note that this expansion was not an impromptu development. Rather, it built on years of cooperation between al-Qaeda and Algerian jihadists of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (known by its acronym in French, GSPC; see Chapter 3). Since then, other Africa-based groups have joined, such as al-Shabaab, JNIM, and Ansaru (see Chapters 2 to 4). With the weakening of the al-Qaeda core, its various branches have become relatively more important in carrying out its objectives.

In a similar vein, ISIS has sought to expand its jihadist brand through the establishment of so-called wilayat. As ISIS explained in a 2016 video, because of the captured new territory in Iraq and Syria, the group was forced to cement its control over the areas conquered and sought to rationalise its governance system by dividing it into wilayat and other subdivisions.³² This process expanded once the caliphate had been proclaimed and was extended to other out-of-area wilayat that were progressively incorporated into the ISIS hub-and-spokes system. In 2016, ISIS claimed it had 35 wilayat globally, of which 19 were in Iraq and Syria, and another 16 were based in other regions.³³ Underscoring the centrality of the wilayat to the governance system was the establishment of an Administration of the Wilayat (also known as the Administration of Distant Provinces), responsible for ensuring cohesion and communicating across borders.³⁴ Subsequently, this body has been renamed the General Directorate of Provinces and grown to one of the organisation's most important decision-making bodies at the same time as ISIS was losing territory in its historical heartlands. There have been at least nine African wilayat, some of which are still active while others have become defunct, including in Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Somalia, the Lake Chad region, the Sahel, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Mozambique.

Although the core al-Qaeda and ISIS organisations have weakened, their branches or wilayat, particularly in Africa, are now responsible for the bulk of their activity worldwide. As such, the ranks of the leaders of these affiliates have advanced within the global networks. However, they are posing an altogether different threat to their home regions and beyond, which is highlighted in this report.

1.4 Terminology

This report uses several recurring words to describe different phenomena. While these words may be used in different and sometimes contentious ways in other texts, the glossary below is intended to help clarify how these words and concepts are or are not used here.

Insurgency is used to describe violent non-state actors looking to overthrow the government in place and/or replace the governance system with their own system of government, in all of the cases studied, based on Sharia.

³⁰ Barak Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*, 2016, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 8.

³¹ Caleb Weiss, "AQIM's Imperial Playbook: Understanding al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb's Expansion into West Africa," 2022, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, United States Military Academy, p. 2.

³² Haroro Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, "Chapter 11: The Structure of the Caliphate," in Haroro J. Ingram (ed.) *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement*, 2020, London: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., pp. 235–248.

³³ Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, "Chapter 11."

³⁴ Hamming, "The General Directorate of Provinces."

Jihadism refers to the conduct of jihad (holy war) as a political action that is a core tenet of the Salafist ideology of Sunni Islam adopted by these organisations. Jihad is an important aspect of Islamic teachings, but not all jihad is violent. Rather, for many Muslims it is waged through self-betterment. Nevertheless, the groups described here use the term to justify their use of violence to achieve their objectives.

Insurgency vs. jihadism are two terms used broadly interchangeably to describe the violent non-state actors studied here. Although they are all motivated by a jihadist Salafist ideology, they are also conducting an uprising of sorts against the nation-states within whose territory they operate. As such, it is difficult to adequately differentiate between the two terms in these contexts.

Nom(s) de guerre (also known as *kunyas* or “war names”) are commonly adopted by jihadi fighters, particularly among IS-linked affiliates, as pseudonyms to mask their real identity or to profile themselves as jihadis. Often, these names will designate the person as an elder or father by including the Arabic prefix “Abu” and reference to the area from which the fighter originates (or is presumed to originate). Examples of this are Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, whose official name was Lahbib Idrissi ould Sidi Abdi ould Said ould El Bachir and who was born in what is today known as Western Sahara. The name al-Sahrawi was likely adopted to highlight his Sahrawi heritage. Similarly, the prominent ISWAP leader, Abu Musab al-Barnawi (“the one from Borno”), whose real name is Habib Yusuf, was likely chosen to highlight his link to Borno. Finally, the first caliph of ISIS was given the nom de guerre Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (“the one from Baghdad”) to highlight his Iraqi links. Throughout this report, many jihadis are referred to by their noms de guerre, as these are common in the literature. For more information on jihadis’ use of noms de guerre, read Vera Mironova and Karam Alhamad’s “The Names of Jihad: A Guide to ISIS’ Noms de Guerre.”³⁵

Terrorism is a term generally avoided here because there is no universal definition. When it is used, it refers to another organisation’s characterisation of the phenomenon. When describing phenomena that others may define as terrorism, other approximations of the term, such as insurgency, jihadism, militantism, or actions of non-state armed actors, are used.

Wilaya (province, plural *wilayat*), in the same vein as *wali* below, *wilaya* is used to designate a jihadist organisation’s territorial governance subdivision under central leadership. It is particularly used for IS-affiliated organisations that IS Central formally recognises as *wilayat*, but have little operational linkage with the central leadership. Nevertheless, the term designates a formalised relationship between the central IS leadership and its affiliated groups elsewhere, typically including coordinated communications, financing, training, and advice. The term *wilaya* is maintained here to distinguish it from other formal territorial entities such as states, regions, and provinces that may make up the subdivisions in the formal nation-states discussed.

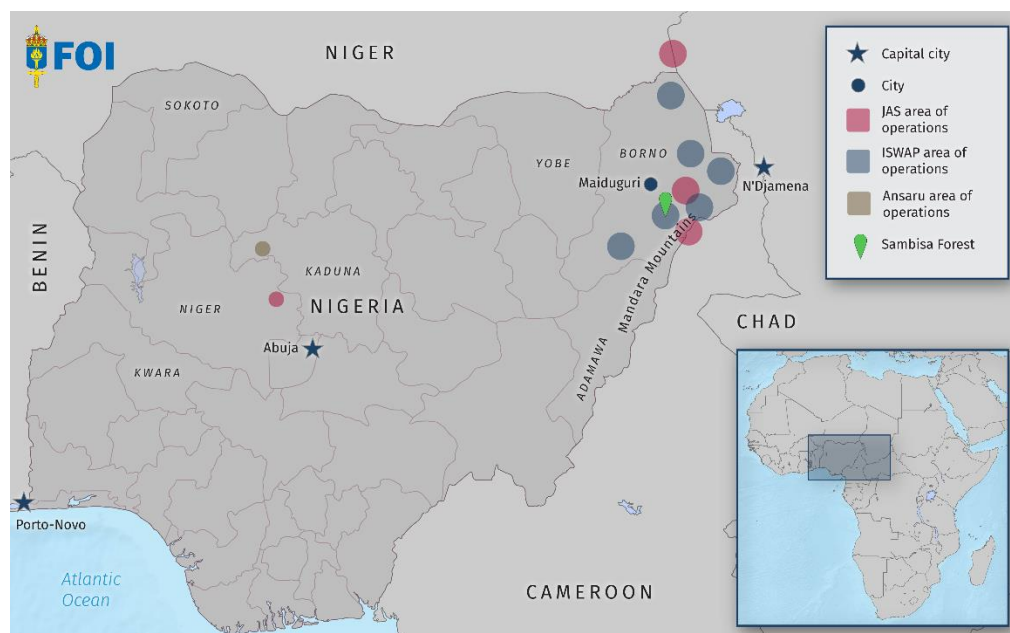
Wali is used in administrative contexts to mean governor. In Arabic, it can also mean legal guardian or custodian, and in some Arabic-speaking countries, such as Algeria, it is a title for heads of provinces (i.e. a territorial unit below the national and above the local). Islamic State also uses the title to designate the leader (*wali*) of its so-called *wilayat*. For instance, the heads of Islamic State’s *wilayat* are called *walis*.

Takfir (excommunication) is one of the main principles upon which al-Qaeda- and IS-affiliated groups are at odds with each other. It refers to the rule by which a Muslim may deem other Muslims non-believers and excommunicate them from the Islamic faith. In the interpretation of these jihadist groups, this is justification for murder.

³⁵ Vera Mironova and Karam Alhamad, “The Names of Jihad: A Guide to ISIS’ Noms de Guerre,” 14 July 2017, Foreign Affairs.

2 Lake Chad basin and Nigeria

This chapter focuses on Nigeria and the Lake Chad basin, the border region between Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, which has been a jihadist and insurgent hotspot for more than 15 years. While the bulk of activity remains confined to northeastern Nigeria's Borno state, insurgent and jihadist attacks occur with some regularity in the neighbouring Nigerian states and the border areas of Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. There are also emerging signs of aligned jihadist groups entrenching and expanding their presence in northwestern Nigeria (see Map 1 below). The two most active organisations are ISWAP and JAS. Both originate in the insurgency popularly referred to as "Boko Haram," although no organisation has formally called itself that.³⁶ A third group, known as *Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis-Sudan* (Ansaru), formed in 2012 as a splinter from JAS. It had been dormant since 2013, but re-activated in western Nigeria in October 2019.³⁷ Even though these three groups differ in size, capabilities, modus operandi, and tactics, their trajectories remain interlinked and cannot be fully understood in isolation. Indeed, these groups observe and learn from each other, and defections between the groups are not uncommon.³⁸ For this reason, this chapter starts with a short historical overview to help the reader situate each group within a wider context, before diving into the major trends of each group over the past five years.



Map 1: Boko Haram area of operations in the Lake Chad basin and Nigeria

Sources: Megatrends Afrika (Amadou & Foucher), UNIDIR (Foucher); UNSC, Thirty-seventh report; Barnett, Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz

³⁶ The name Boko Haram was pejoratively used by Nigerian detractors from a combination of the Hausa word '*yan boko*, meaning "child of the book," referring to elites educated in British schools and seen as having turned away from Allah towards Western values, and the Arabic word *haram*, which means sin. For further reading, see Andrew Walker's article from 2012, "What is Boko Haram?"; Vincent Foucher, "Pourquoi on ne devrait plus parler de 'Boko Haram,'" 9 September 2021, *Afrique XXI*.

³⁷ Saheed Babajide Owonikoko, "Ansaru terror leaders' arrest is a strategic change for Nigeria: What could happen next," *The Conversation*, 15 September 2025.

³⁸ Vincent Foucher, "'Burn the Camps': Jihadist Resurgence in the Lake Chad Basin," 16 July 2025, Italian Institute for International Political Studies.

2.1 A brief history of “Boko Haram”

JAS, Ansaru, and ultimately ISWAP are the offspring of the Salafist movement founded and led by Islamic cleric Mohamed Yusuf in Borno’s state capital Maiduguri in 2002.³⁹ The movement, which became known as the *yusufiya* (or the Mohammed Yusuf Islamic Movement), blamed the social ills of Maiduguri, in particular, and northern Nigeria, more broadly, on the colonial heritage, the Western education and ideas brought by the British, and the endemically corrupt and incompetent postcolonial and newly democratic Nigerian state.⁴⁰ In his doctrinal book—*This is our doctrine and method in proselytisation*—Yusuf prominently opposed democracy, deeming it “a doctrine of unbelievers” and that “using its system would be *kufir*, or unbelief.”⁴¹ The yusufiya progressively radicalised throughout the 2000s, but a chain of events eventually birthed the armed insurgency seen today.

Mounting animosity in June and July 2009 between yusufiya sympathisers and security forces led to deadly clashes and a brutal crackdown in Maiduguri, leaving up to 1,000 insurgents dead, including Yusuf himself who was executed without trial by police.⁴² The crackdown forced Yusuf’s followers out of the urban areas where they were present and into the countryside, where they recovered and regrouped. Yusuf’s successor, Abubakar Shekau, oversaw the expansion of the newly established insurgent movement, which he named JAS.⁴³ In September 2010, heavily armed JAS-militants raided a prison in the city of Bauchi, the state-capital in its eponymous state, freeing more than 700 prisoners, of which 150 were believed to be JAS sympathisers.⁴⁴ In effect, this marked the group’s first armed attack. Over the following four years, JAS launched a series of spectacular attacks on state security forces, and conducted mass kidnappings, such as the high-profile abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014. Although Chibok became the most prominent kidnapping to Western audiences, JAS has kidnapped hundreds more girls and women, as well as several thousand boys who were coerced into fighting for the group after the Chibok incident.⁴⁵ At its peak in the 2014–15 period, JAS declared a *dawlah* (state) with Gwoza as its capital, seized control of large swathes of territory, including several cities, and became the “world’s deadliest terror group.”⁴⁶ In March 2015, Shekau swore allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and ISIS, a pledge that the IS leadership approved within a week, transforming JAS into an official IS province—ISWAP—with Shekau as *wali*.⁴⁷

Throughout the charismatic Shekau’s tenure until his death in 2021, his brutal leadership remained a central point of contention, particularly over his interpretation of *takfir*.⁴⁸ It led to the initial splinter that created Ansaru in 2012 and prompted his ousting as ISWAP leader in 2016. Shekau’s perceived megalomania and extreme targeting of civilians allegedly even concerned the IS leadership, and it contributed to IS Central approving his

³⁹ For an in-depth account of the rise and fall of Boko Haram, see Daniel Torbjörnsson and Michael Jonsson, “Boko Haram: On the verge of defeat or a long term threat?” November 2017, FOI-R--44--SE, Stockholm: The Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI); Hilary Matfess, “Boko Haram: History and Context,” 26 October 2017, African History: Oxford Research Encyclopaedias.

⁴⁰ Jason Warner et al., “The Islamic State’s West Africa Province,” in *The Islamic State in Africa: The Emergence, evolution, and future of the next jihadist battlefield*, 2021, London: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd.

⁴¹ Translated quote from Mohamed Yusuf in Matfess, “Boko Haram.”

⁴² Ibid.; Warner, “The Islamic State’s”; International Crisis Group, (ICG), “JAS vs. ISWAP: The War of the Boko Haram Splinters,” Africa Briefing no.196, 28 March 2024, p. 4.

⁴³ Warner, “The Islamic State’s”; Jacob Zenn and Caleb Weiss, “Ansaru Resurgent,” October 2021, Perspectives on Terrorism, vol.15, no.5, pp. 46–58.

⁴⁴ Warner, “The Islamic State’s,” p. 136; Matfess, “Boko Haram”

⁴⁵ Sarah A. Topol, “Trained to Kill: How Four Boy Soldiers Survived Boko Haram,” 21 June 2017, The New York Times.

⁴⁶ Matfess, “Boko Haram.”

⁴⁷ Warner “The Islamic State’s,” p. 146.

⁴⁸ Torbjörnsson and Jonsson, “Boko Haram,” p. 28; Aliyu Dahiru, “Takfir: The Ideological Conflict That Divided Boko Haram,” 23 June 2021, HumAngle; Jacob Zenn, “Brief: Three Years After Death of Shekau, Boko Haram Appears to Gain on ISWAP Under Leadership of Bakura,” 30 May 2024, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 22, no. 8. Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation.

replacement by Habib Yusuf (known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Musab al-Barnawi) – one of Mohamed Yusuf’s sons, who was seen as more pragmatic and more in line with IS’s strategy of winning hearts and minds. After Shekau’s ouster, ISWAP split into two factions: one loyal to al-Barnawi, continuing under the ISWAP flag and one loyal to Shekau, reverting back to using the name JAS but with the same IS flag.⁴⁹ Almost immediately after Shekau was ousted, these two groups engaged in a war against each other, which has continued throughout the 2020s, leading to significant losses of combatants, who were either killed in action or have turned themselves in to the authorities.⁵⁰ In May 2021, Shekau detonated his suicide vest during a standoff with ISWAP militants, after which JAS split into three factions in the Lake Chad basin and a fourth faction between the states of Niger and Kaduna (see Section 2.3). Table 1 (compiled by the author) below summarises the evolution of the Boko Haram insurgency in a few key years.

Table 1: Timeline of the Boko Haram insurgency

2000–09	Muhamed Yusuf preaches to urban communities in Maiduguri and other cities in northeastern Nigeria. The movement lacks a formal name but is referred to as either yusufiya, the Muhamed Yusuf Islamic Movement, or Boko Haram.
2009	Maiduguri uprising: Muhamed Yusuf is extrajudicially executed.
2010	Boko Haram conducts its first attack and adopts the name JAS. Abubakar Shekau emerges as its leader.
2012	Ansaru splits from JAS due to disagreements with Shekau.
2015	Shekau swears allegiance with ISIS, which formally recognises JAS as a province and names it ISWAP.
2016	Shekau is ousted from ISWAP and replaced by Habib. Shekau-loyalists revert back to using the name JAS.
2021	Shekau is killed. JAS in the Lake Chad splits into three factions.
2022–24	ISWAP consolidates control in Borno state, but JAS maintains control of Gwozi Hills and parts of Lake Chad.

2.2 Islamic State in West Africa Province

ISWAP is the largest of the three groups in the Lake Chad basin and Nigeria, the largest in West Africa, and has been among the most active and successful IS affiliates globally in recent years.⁵¹ Its ultimate goal is to establish an Islamic state in the Lake Chad region, based on its Salafi interpretation of the Quran and modelled on its Levantine counterpart, ISIS, at its peak.⁵² Its area of operations remains largely restricted to Borno and parts of the border areas of neighbouring countries in the Lake Chad basin. However, ISWAP has also conducted attacks in other Nigerian states, such as Adamawa, Bauchi, Yobe, and the Federal Capital Territory, where Abuja is located, and potentially as far south as Ondo.⁵³ Since the Nigerian military implemented its strategy of so-called “super camps” in 2019, whereby military resources were concentrated in a few fortified camps, the conflict between ISWAP and the Nigerian state appeared to, at least temporarily, have reached a stalemate, as the number of attacks ISWAP claimed in 2023 declined and its area of operations remained restricted.⁵⁴ However, fighting between the Nigerian armed forces

⁴⁹ Torbjörnsson and Jonsson, “Boko Haram.”

⁵⁰ ICG, “JAS vs. ISWAP,” p. 2.

⁵¹ UNSC, “Thirty-fifth report,” p. 7; UNSC, “Thirty-sixth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” 24 July 2025; Interview 5: Lake Chad basin expert 2.

⁵² Malik Samuel, “When rebels rule: ISWAP’s formula for winning support in Nigeria’s northeast,” 24 July 2025, The New Humanitarian.

⁵³ Timothy Obiezu, “Nigerian Officials Say Terror Group ISWAP Behind Church Massacre,” 10 June 2022, Voice of America.

⁵⁴ Jacob Zenn, “L’armée nigérienne et Boko Haram: les ‘supercamps’ peuvent-ils tenir le statu quo? 2021, Politique Étrangère, Issue 1 Printemps, pp. 177–190 ; ICG, “JAS vs. ISWAP,” p. 7.

and ISWAP intensified again in 2025, and the conflict between ISWAP and JAS also remained intense throughout the year, with particularly intense fighting in and around Lake Chad. Contrary to many observers' expectations after Shekau's death in 2021, ISWAP has not managed to defeat JAS completely.⁵⁵ While ISWAP has managed to dislodge JAS from the Sambisa Forest, one of its three strongholds in the region, other JAS factions remain well-entrenched in the Gwoza Hills of the Mandara Mountains and parts of the Lake Chad basin.⁵⁶

2.2.1 ISWAP trends 2020–25

Besides the broader developments in the conflict mentioned above, four main dynamics for ISWAP are worth highlighting. The first one is that ISWAP's influence has been growing within Africa and within the global IS hierarchy. ISWAP is the largest and kinetically most advanced IS province in Africa. When the General Directorate of Provinces (GDP) was established in 2019, *al-Furqan* was established as one of four offices in Africa and was responsible for directing ISWAP and its Sahelian branch (see Section 3.3). The other offices were *al-Karrar* in Somalia (see Section 4.2), *al-Anfal* for North Africa, and *Zu al-Nurayn* for Egypt and Sudan.⁵⁷ By 2025, the latter two had been insurmountably weakened and incorporated into *al-Furqan*.⁵⁸

Furthermore, *al-Furqan* has emerged as the most "prolific IS propaganda producer, surpassing other affiliates in content volume," while also supporting its affiliates in the Sahel and North Africa.⁵⁹ Given the strict guidelines that IS imposes in order for content to be included in its Arabic-language newsletter *al-Naba*, and given the large volume of ISWAP content included in recent years, the UN panel of experts has assessed that IS Central and ISWAP have strong links.⁶⁰ In addition to Arabic, ISWAP also communicates in Hausa—the lingua franca in much of northern Nigeria, southern Niger, and parts of Cameroon and Chad—and has allegedly started its own Hausa-speaking radio channel.⁶¹

ISWAP's rise within the IS-ranks is further highlighted by the promotion of its leaders within the IS hierarchy. For instance, there has been speculation in recent years about whether prominent ISWAP leader al-Barnawi had become a member of Islamic State's so-called Delegated Committee, which has been one of the most powerful councils within the organisation and is responsible for assisting the caliph in his missions.⁶² At the same time, al-Barnawi's precise role within ISWAP has been uncertain in recent years due to claims that he is dead (some say he died in 2021, others in 2023).⁶³ Some sources claim he

⁵⁵ Jacob Zenn, "L'armée nigériane, pp. 177–190 ; ICG, "JAS vs. ISWAP," p. 7.

⁵⁶ Vincent Foucher, "Boko Haram: Mapping an evolving armed constellation," September 2024, MEAC, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024; Malik Samuel, "Unseen advances, quiet offensives: ISWAP's formula for winning support in Nigeria's northeast," 24 July 2025, The New Humanitarian.

⁵⁷ UNSC, "Thirtieth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," 15 July 2022.

⁵⁸ UNSC, "Twenty-ninth 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," 3 February 2022; UNSC, "Thirtieth report"; UNSC, "Thirty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," 22 July 2024; Hamming, "The General Directorate."

⁵⁹ UNSC, "Thirty-sixth report."

⁶⁰ UNSC, "Twenty-seventh 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," 3 February 2021.

⁶¹ Interview 1: Lake Chad basin expert 1.

⁶² The Delegated Committee is responsible for defining the ideological course and clarifying issues of creed (*aqida*) and methodology (*manhaj*) on behalf of the caliph; UNSC, "Thirty-fifth report"; Thomas Jocelyn, "Islamic State rescinds one of its most problematic rulings," 20 September 2017, FDD's Long War Journal; Hamming, "The General Directorate"; Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, "The Structure of the Islamic State," p. 237.

⁶³ James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, "Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a 'Banditization' of Jihad?" January 2022, CTC Sentinel, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 46–67; UNSC, "Thirty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," p. 8.

continues to run ISWAP's media operations.⁶⁴ Others claim he was critically injured during a battle with JAS in August 2021, but was evacuated and treated outside of the country, and returned to Nigeria early the following year.⁶⁵ Regardless of al-Barnawi's exact status and location, it is clear that he has played an important role within ISWAP, both as a cleric and as a field commander, and that he had the respect of the IS Central leadership.⁶⁶ The most recent report of the UN sanctions monitoring group, however, suggests that Ba'a Shuwa (whose *nom de guerre* is Abu Musa al-Mangawi) has now replaced al-Barnawi as ISWAP leader.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, Abu Bakr ibn Muhammad ibn Ali al-Mainuki (or al-Mainok), remains the head of al-Furqan and potentially also the GDP (or even IS's Shura council).⁶⁸

The second broader trend is that ISWAP's organisation has become much more rationalised and bureaucratised since the beginning of the decade.⁶⁹ One aspect of this is that ISWAP has adopted a clearer division of labour (both functional and regional) and a command-and-control structure. As Lake Chad expert Vincent Foucher explains, "the command structure seems to revolve around two men": al-Barnawi, acting as a bridge between ISWAP and IS Central, and al-Mainuki, described as an experienced field commander.⁷⁰ Although the two men have been at the helm of the ISWAP hierarchy for several years, the organisation has adopted more of a collective leadership approach with repeated and peaceful leadership changes.⁷¹ The organisation also appears to have a system of checks-and-balances in place that penalises underperforming or disobedient members of the group, including through demotions.⁷² In addition, ISWAP has set up a system for distributing the spoils of war (*ghanima*) equitably between different units that have contributed in different ways during attacks.⁷³

This rationalisation of the bureaucracy may also explain the repeated leadership changes mentioned above. Below the al-Furqan office is the ISWAP Shura (advisory council) containing at least six members with different functional responsibilities.⁷⁴ These include military affairs, justice, administration, internal security or intelligence, and policing. Furthermore, ISWAP is also dividing its work along three geographical zones. A 2024 study suggests these are divided into three wilayat: Buhaira, Faruq, and "Nigeria."⁷⁵ The two former wilayat are located within the Lake Chad basin, and the third in an unknown location outside northeastern Nigeria. Within the provinces, there are a total of five districts (*mantiqa*): three in Buhaira, two in Faruq, and one in "Nigeria," each with its own military commander, who is supported by several ranks of officers. The fact that ISWAP has divided its organisation into regional zones is also echoed by the UN panel of experts.⁷⁶ In addition to the clear organisational structure on paper, ISWAP also appears to be more selective in its recruitment and use of personnel, compared to JAS, for instance. The group is selective about who it recruits to fight for it, and recruitment is based on defined needs.⁷⁷ Moreover, the management of arms appears to have been centralised, with the right to carry a weapon restricted to those members who have been approved as

⁶⁴ UNSC, "Thirty-seventh report," p. 8.

⁶⁵ Samuel, "Unseen advances, quiet offensives," p. 7.

⁶⁶ Interview 1.

⁶⁷ UNSC, "Thirty-seventh report," p. 8.

⁶⁸ Al-Mainuki is believed to have replaced al-Barnawi as head of al-Furqan in 2023. UNSC, "Thirty-sixth report," p. 8; UNSC, "Thirty-seventh report," p. 7; Jacob Zenn, "Abubakar Mainok: ISWAP's Sahel-Based al-Furqan Representative," 8 March 2023, Jamestown Foundation.

⁶⁹ ICG, "JAS vs. ISWAP," p. 8–9; Interview 6: Lake Chad basin expert 3.

⁷⁰ Foucher, "Boko Haram," p. 14.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13; Samuel, "Unseen advances, quiet offensives," p. 7.

⁷² Samuel, "Unseen advances, quiet offensives," p. 8.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷⁴ The literature is unclear about the exact number of Shura members, with suggested ranges between six and eleven members.

⁷⁵ Foucher, "Boko Haram," p. 14.

⁷⁶ UNSC, "Twenty-ninth report."

⁷⁷ Interview 6; Foucher, "Boko Haram," p. 11.

fighters. The organisation is also trying to strengthen discipline by policing the misbehaviour of its members, for instance combatants extorting local communities.⁷⁸ However, it is not clear from the literature consulted for this report what such punishments or penalties have entailed.

The third major dynamic is that ISWAP has steadily boosted its military capacity, particularly between 2024 and 2025. During this time, its ranks increased from a range of 4,000–7,000 to the range of 8,000–12,000 fighters.⁷⁹ It is unclear, however, where those fighters are coming from. Many are likely recruited locally, or through defections from JAS. Recent propaganda videos by ISWAP have also shown a small number of fighters of North African or Middle Eastern origin taking part in nighttime assaults. This has led to speculation about a growing influx of foreign fighters. However, several experts are sceptical about a potential upsurge of “foreign combatants” in Lake Chad basin in the near term.⁸⁰ Many point to ISWAP being inherently Nigerian or regional, with the vast majority of fighters coming from Borno or northern Nigeria. The main languages ISWAP communicates in are also those of this region.⁸¹ Furthermore, many have depicted Boko Haram as an organisation associated with the Kanuri ethnic group, but this is also debated. Indeed, the yusufiya movement that preceded Boko Haram was born in Borno state, where the Kanuri are a majority ethnic group. However, it is important to note that it was born in the city of Maiduguri, the state capital, where various groups from northern Nigeria are present.⁸² That the group communicates in Hausa, rather than Kanuri, and recruits among various ethnic groups further emphasises its multiethnic ambitions. But above all, the UN panel of experts believes most of those who have arrived are trainers from the Middle East who have carried out in-situ training of local combatants, and as such do not indicate an influx of new fighting capacity.⁸³

Fourthly, ISWAP has improved its capabilities, as shown by more sophisticated tactics. One aspect of this was a notable upsurge in the number of attacks using vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices in the first six months of 2024.⁸⁴ Another is the use of weaponised uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs). Indeed, in December 2024, ISWAP launched several UAVs equipped with grenades during a complex assault on a military base in Wajiroko, Borno.⁸⁵ The enhancement of tactics may be explained by the arrival of trainers from the Middle East and the smuggling of arms and equipment. But its relatively strengthened firepower is also explained by theft of weapons and equipment during raids on military barracks, which in turn weaken the capabilities of local forces. For instance, when local forces are forced to retreat from their camps, they leave behind such equipment as mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles or excavators, which are used for building and maintaining trenches to protect population areas and military camps.⁸⁶ The loss of such equipment therefore also weakens the Nigerian forces’ capabilities.

Despite strengthening its governance, boosting its ranks, and enhancing its capabilities, it is important to underscore that ISWAP remains concentrated in rural areas of the Lake Chad basin. Although it has demonstrated an ability to strike targets far outside its areas of operations, it has so far been unable to dislodge JAS-factions from their strongholds in the Mandara Mountains and Lake Chad. The organisation has also struggled to establish a durable and effective presence in the northwestern states of Nigeria. That is neither for

⁷⁸ Interview 6.

⁷⁹ UNSC, “Thirty-third report”; UNSC, “Twenty-fifth 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,” 20 January 2020; UNSC, “Thirty-sixth report”; Foucher, “Boko Haram,” p. 21.

⁸⁰ Interview 5.

⁸¹ Interview 6.

⁸² Interview 6.

⁸³ UNSC, “Thirty-fourth report”; UNSC, “Thirty-sixth report.”

⁸⁴ UNSC, “Thirty-fourth report.”

⁸⁵ Victor Olorunfemi, “Nigerian army raises security alert as Boko Haram swarms Borno military base with kamikaze drones,” 25 December 2024, Peoples Gazette.

⁸⁶ Foucher, “Burn the camps.”

lack of ambition nor attempts to do so, but likely due to operations in a very complex security environment by various armed actors, including so-called bandit groups, self-defence militias, the Nigerian armed forces, and other jihadi groups such as Ansaru, JAS, JNIM, and ISSP. Looking eastward, it also appears that ISWAP has shown little ambition or capability to expand eastward into Cameroon and Chad. The group regularly conducts nighttime raids on villages and small communities, but appears unwilling to establish a more durable presence. Whether or not this is due to strategic choices by the group or some form of tacit agreement with local communities is difficult to ascertain based on the research conducted for this report.

2.2.2 ISWAP's relations with the IS core

The extent to which ISWAP has operational ties to the IS core is a recurrent topic of debate, particularly with regard to Boko Haram's relations with IS Central.⁸⁷ Given this categorisation, it is not always clear what faction such assessments are referring to. Indeed, most experts seem to think that JAS today has very weak, if not non-existent, links to IS Central (see Section 2.3). Conversely, many sources suggest that ISWAP's relations to the IS core have been strong throughout the years and even strengthened more recently. There are several indications of this as mentioned above. First is the apparent promotion of ISWAP leaders to senior positions within IS. Second is ISWAP's increased role within the organisation more broadly, including the increased number of ISWAP-produced content in al-Naba, the influx of foreign combatants and trainers, and the adoption of tactics previously used by ISIS in the Middle East.⁸⁸ The incorporation of other IS provinces into al-Furqan further points to ISWAP's growing importance within the IS global hierarchy. Thirdly, several reports have pointed to al-Barnawi explicitly seeking and obtaining IS Central's approval before the ouster of Shekau in 2016. By the same token, some sources allege that the IS core approved the assault on JAS in 2021, which culminated in Shekau's death, prior to the attack's taking place.⁸⁹ This would indicate some level of coordination or, at the very least, consultation with the IS core.

However, the implications of this ascension are unclear. While it is true that ISWAP's influence has increased, it is also true that the IS core has been dramatically weakened. This applies both to its activities in its historic heartlands of Iraq and Syria, but also to Somalia, where its local province had gained in prominence in recent years but has faced intense attrition over the past year (see Section 4.2).

Whether ISWAP's strengthening will lead to a growing influx of foreign fighters remains to be seen. Several factors point against such a scenario, however. Firstly, moving fighters outside IS's historical heartlands in Iraq and Syria would likely place the global jihadi network in an existential crisis and reduce its force of attraction, as promoting an apex leader who is not a member of the Quraish tribe would further weaken its appeal. Secondly, and closely related to the former, conducting jihad in the Lake Chad basin has little appeal to jihadi fighters in other regions. Despite talk about a Muslim ummah, IS Central is quintessentially tribalistic and racially hierarchical, which reduces the likelihood it would be led by someone outside its historical heartlands. Thus, since ISWAP remains highly localised, very few of its fighters are driven by ideology, so it is highly likely that the organisation will remain concentrated in the Lake Chad basin over the coming years.

2.3 Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li al-Da'wa wa al-Jihad

JAS is both the predecessor and successor of ISWAP. The group reached global infamy in 2014 when it kidnapped 276 schoolgirls from the northern town of Chibok, Borno. JAS temporarily disappeared when it joined IS and became ISWAP and re-emerged after

⁸⁷ Matfess, "Boko Haram," p. 10.

⁸⁸ Al-Naba is an IS newsletter in Arabic, usually released on a weekly basis.

⁸⁹ Australian Government, "Boko Haram"; Zenn, "Brief: Three Years."

Shekau was ousted from ISWAP but continued fighting with a group of loyalists under the JAS brand in 2016. Since the schism, the two groups have been at war with each other. The war came to a head in 2021, after Shekau killed himself amid a standoff with ISWAP. Contrary to many analysts' expectations, Shekau's death did not mean the end of JAS.⁹⁰ Although ISWAP has expanded its control and pushed out JAS from the Sambisa Forest, JAS has proven resilient and even temporarily regained some territory and expanded its control in parts of the Lake Chad area.⁹¹ Nevertheless, it remains confined to very limited spaces with difficult-to-penetrate terrain, such as the Gwozi Hills and the shore areas of the Lake Chad.⁹²

The war between the two factions is part territorial, part ideological. From an ideological perspective, JAS stands out from ISWAP in how it treats civilians and Muslims who do not adhere to JAS's extremist interpretation of takfir and what it considers legitimate spoils of war (*al ghanima*) or loot from civilians (*fay*).⁹³ While ISWAP does allow its fighters to collect ghanima, it has forbidden fay'. In contrast, JAS appears to allow its fighters to keep such loot as a personal revenue-generating activity. As such, JAS has become more rapacious, regularly plundering local communities, promoting sectarianism, sanctioning suicide attacks on civilians, and enslaving individuals it deems to be non-believers.⁹⁴

2.3.1 JAS trends 2020–25

In addition to some of the overlapping trends already discussed above, two JAS-specific dynamics are worth highlighting from the past five years. The first is that the overall weakening of JAS has accelerated since the death of Shekau. This is evident both in its loss of territory to ISWAP, specifically in the historical Boko Haram stronghold, Sambisa Forest, and its splintering into three groups based in Lake Chad basin; a fourth faction, led by Adamu Saddiqu, has been based in the border region between the north-central state of Kaduna and the western state of Niger since 2020.⁹⁵ Although the Saddiqu faction appears to have adopted a more pragmatic approach, particularly in the way it treats Christians, it appears to remain affiliated with the other JAS groups. The first faction is allegedly led by Bakura Doro, an experienced JAS fighter who rose through its ranks and who is believed to have little religious training, and is based in the Lake Chad environs.⁹⁶ The Bakura Doro faction appears to be the most active of the three.⁹⁷ The second faction is led by Aliyu Ngulde and based in the Gwoza Hills in the Mandara Mountains on the border between Nigeria and Cameroon. The third, and much smaller, faction is the Dar al-Gazuma group, which is based close to the small town of Bama.⁹⁸ The Bakura faction is

⁹⁰ ICG, "JAS vs. ISWAP.," UNSC, "Twenty-eighth 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," 21 July 2021.

⁹¹ ICG, "JAS vs. ISWAP"; Interview 1.

⁹² Interview 5.

⁹³ Aliyu Dahiru, "Takfir."

⁹⁴ ICG, "JAS vs. ISWAP."

⁹⁵ The exact location of Saddiqu's faction is unclear and contested. Earlier reports, such as Barnett et al., identified this faction with the Shiroro local government area in Niger state, while latter reports, both by the UN and ICG, locate it in Kaduna state. It is possible that this is the same faction that has either been forced out of Shiroro, which is about 35 km from the Kaduna state border, or that it has expanded into Kaduna state in recent years, while still retaining a presence in Shiroro. UNSC, "Thirty-third report"; UNSC, "Thirty-fourth report," p. 9; ICG, "JAS vs. ISWAP," p. 8; James Barnett and Umar Musa, "Kachallas and Kinship: Understanding Jihadi Expansion and Diffusion in Nigeria," January 2026, CTC Sentinel, vol.19, no.1, pp. 1–28.

⁹⁶ However, the leadership of the so-called Bakura faction was unclear until at least March 2022. Another individual, Bakura Sahalaba, was until then alleged to be the apex and religious leader of the faction while Bakura Doro was the military commander. ICG, "JAS vs. ISWAP," p. 5.

⁹⁷ UNSC, "Thirty-sixth report," p. 8.

⁹⁸ Foucher, "Boko Haram," p. 13; ICG, "JAS vs. ISWAP," p. 7; UNSC, "Twenty-ninth report," p. 10; UNSC "Thirty-third report," p. 9.

estimated to be the largest, with 1,000–1,500 fighters, followed by the Ngulde faction with 500–1,000 combatants.⁹⁹

The second dynamic is that despite the apparent attrition affecting JAS, the group has remained resilient against the much larger and better equipped and organised ISWAP. Partly, this is due to JAS's areas of control, whose topography makes them easier to defend and harder to seize. Another argument, advanced by former combatants interviewed by Amadou and Foucher, is that JAS appears more appealing to some members, particularly within the rank-and-file, who have enjoyed more freedoms within the group as compared to ISWAP. Indeed, the very rationalisation of ISWAP, with its consistent system of control and punishment of those stepping out of line, appears to have been a key reason why JAS members have chosen to remain within JAS or to join the relevant governments' disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes.¹⁰⁰

Thirdly, and perhaps as a consequence of the former, is that JAS slowly appears to be moving away from the category of structured jihadist or insurgent organisations and moving closer into the category of more loosely defined and much more patrimonial bandit organisations.¹⁰¹ The members of individual factions are driven more by loyalty to a specific leader rather than a broader doctrine, such as that presented by ISWAP. Loyalties are based on the leader's ability to provide for the group. But despite these traits, the JAS factions remain very much Islamist and "see themselves as the only true Muslims in the whole area."¹⁰²

2.3.2 JAS's relations with the IS core

JAS relations with the IS core today appear very weak, but they are not non-existent. JAS has yet to declare its allegiance to IS, or indeed, al-Qaeda, since it split from ISWAP in 2016.¹⁰³ Several sources allege, however, that contacts continued between IS Central and Shekau until his death in 2021 and afterwards. For instance, IS reportedly dispatched mediators to arbitrate in a conflict between Bakura Doro and Bakura Sahalaba, leading to the latter's being appointed as JAS imam, effectively demoting the former due to insufficient religious knowledge.¹⁰⁴ After Sahalaba's execution, however, and given the broader dynamics relating to JAS, much seems to indicate that the links between the JAS factions and the IS core will continue to weaken over the near- to medium term. The lack of adequately trained religious leaders, along with the ideological differences between JAS and ISWAP, and by extension, between JAS and the IS core, appears to confirm this. As such, JAS will likely remain a highly localised insurgency, posing little risk to global security in the long term, but exacting significant harm to local communities and continuing to be a destabilising factor for the governments in the region.

2.4 Ansaru

Although Ansaru is no longer based in the Lake Chad region, it is nevertheless anchored in the Boko Haram and Sahel insurgencies, particularly al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, see Chapter 4).¹⁰⁵ With AQIM's blessing, several senior members of JAS defected and created Ansaru in January 2012 and joined the al-Qaeda constellation.¹⁰⁶ Their decision was due to growing disagreement with Shekau's extremist tactics. Ansaru

⁹⁹ UNSC, "Thirty-third report."

¹⁰⁰ Maman Inoua Elhadji Mahamadou Amadou and Vincent Foucher, "Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin: The Bakura Faction and its Resistance to the Rationalisation of Jihad," December 2022, Megatrends Afrika, Policy Brief 08; ICG, "JAS vs. ISWAP."

¹⁰¹ Interview 5.

¹⁰² Amadou and Foucher, "Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin"; Interview 5.

¹⁰³ UNSC, "Thirty-third report," p. 9.

¹⁰⁴ Amadou and Foucher, "Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin."

¹⁰⁵ Zenn and Weiss, "Ansaru Resurgent," pp. 47–48.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

claimed it wanted to defend Nigerian Muslims from Christians, and signalled that it was aligned with al-Qaeda's symbols, messaging, and ambitions of creating an Islamic state, inspired by the Fulani empire of Usman dan Fodio (1754–1817). In particular, Ansaru targeted foreign interests in Nigeria, predominantly through kidnappings for ransom. Despite this new formation, Ansaru struggled to grow, partly because its main patron in the Sahel, AQIM, was facing attrition not only as a result of the French intervention in northern Mali in 2013, but also because of the conflict that erupted between its founding members and Shekau at the time of the splinter. As such, the group became largely dormant from 2013 onwards. Some of its members reintegrated within JAS and later on with ISWAP.

2.4.1 Ansaru trends 2020–25

In October 2019, Ansaru announced that it had re-activated and created a media channel.¹⁰⁷ Several months would nevertheless pass before it claimed its first attack, in January 2020, during which it kidnapped the emir of Potiskum of Yobe state and killed several soldiers along a highway in the neighbouring state of Kaduna.¹⁰⁸ On 31 December 2021, Ansaru again pledged allegiance to AQIM (see Chapter 3) and is alleged to have received funds and equipment from al-Qaeda's Sahelian branch, JNIM, around the same time.¹⁰⁹ However, since then, Ansaru appears to have been unable to sustain itself operationally and only a few attacks have been confirmed.¹¹⁰ The arrest of several leaders during 2025 has likely further hampered the organisation's growth outlook in the medium term.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, northwestern Nigeria, where Ansaru operates, is already rife with various non-state armed groups, including so-called bandits, a JAS affiliate, ISWAP and JNIM cells, as well as other Islamist militant groups. It is possible that this may have limited the group's ability to become more entrenched or expand.¹¹² But it is also true that Ansaru may have, to some extent, benefitted from their presence. As the fieldwork by Barnett, Rufa'I, and Abdulaziz indicates, Ansaru appears to have coexisted and even cooperated with some local bandit gangs.¹¹³ Despite these challenges, Ansaru's strength very much lies in its apparent links with the al-Qaeda core and ideology, making it a potential latent threat in the long term, or as long as al-Qaeda endures.

2.4.2 Ansaru's relations with the al-Qaeda core

While Ansaru's members have historically enjoyed rather clear links to AQIM, as well as al-Qaeda-affiliates in Libya and Sudan, its relationship with the al-Qaeda core since the beginning of 2020 appears to be mainly anchored in mutual propaganda efforts. Ansaru has repeatedly made statements celebrating al-Qaeda or the Taliban. By the same token, al-Qaeda has included Ansaru among its African branches in its propaganda statements.¹¹⁴

The very volatile environment in which Ansaru is present may likely provide a potential recruitment pool and growth area for the group, particularly if JNIM continues to expand and become more entrenched in northwestern Nigeria. The alleged involvement of Ansaru in JNIM's first claimed attack in Nigeria in October 2025 (see Section 3.2) underscores this expansion potential. This risk should be seen against the backdrop of mounting

¹⁰⁷ US Department of State: Country Report on Terrorism 2019—Chapter 5—Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis-Sudan (Ansaru), 2019; UNSC, "Twenty-sixth 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," 23 July 2020, p. 11.

¹⁰⁸ Ibrahim Mohamed, "Six killed, many kidnapped as armed men in military uniform attack emir's convoy," 15 January 2020, Premium Times; UNSC, "Twenty-sixth report," p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ UNSC, "Thirtieth report,"; Interview 2: Sahel expert 1.

¹¹⁰ UNSC, "Thirty-third report," p. 9.

¹¹¹ Africa News with Associated Press, "Nigeria has arrested 2 militant leaders on its most wanted list," 18 August 2025; Owonikoko, "Ansaru terror leaders' arrest."

¹¹² Barnett, Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz, "Northwestern Nigeria."

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Zenn and Weiss, "Ansaru Resurgent," p. 46.

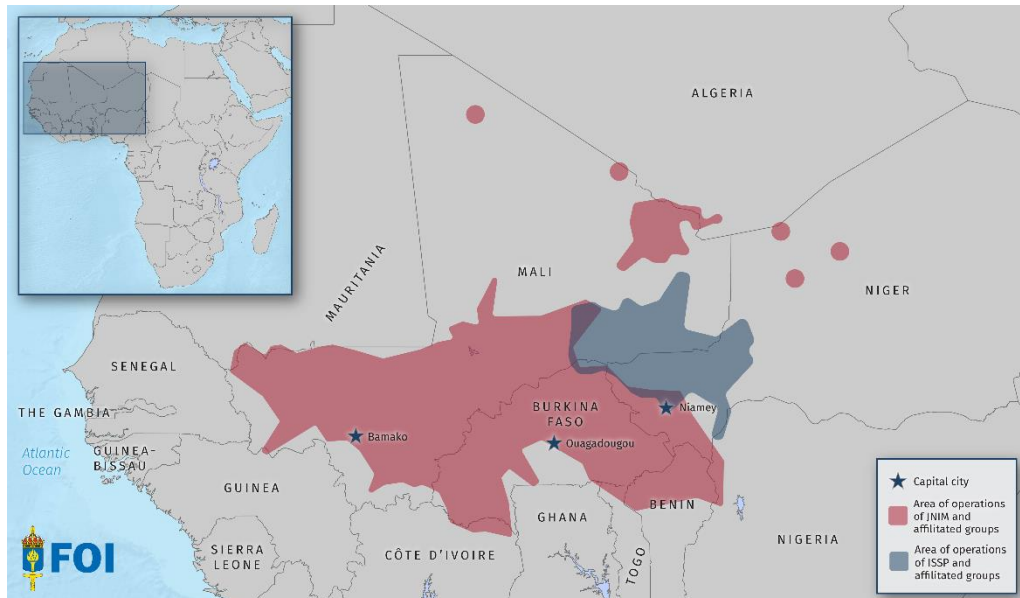
competition for influence from other Islamist and non-religious armed groups operating in the area, including JNIM, ISSP, Lakurawa, bandit groups, self-defence groups, and the Nigerian armed forces. As such, Ansaru could become a conduit for JNIM and therefore also al-Qaeda expansion into this arena, which could lead to its growth over the coming years. This scenario should be further considered given the Nigerian state's many other insecurity woes in the Lake Chad basin and elsewhere, as well as the deteriorated security cooperation with the country's northern neighbour, Niger.

3 Sahel

The Sahel has been a hotspot for jihadist violence since 2021, accounting for 55 per cent of all terrorist-related fatalities in Africa.¹¹⁵ This chapter describes the evolution of the two main jihadi organisations in the Sahel: *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (Group to Support Islam and Muslims, hereafter JNIM) and Islamic State in Sahel Province (ISSP).

3.1 A brief history of Sahel's jihadist groups

The jihadist organisations operating in the Sahel today trace their roots to jihadi groups who fought during the Algerian civil war and al-Qaeda's co-opting of such groups in the late 2000s and early 2010s. When these groups, in particular the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (known by its acronym in French, GSPC), and before it the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA), were pushed out of their historical heartland in Algeria, they found safe haven in northern Mali, from where they could entrench themselves in the local communities through intermarriages and other alliances.¹¹⁶ Throughout the 2010s al-Qaeda's regional branch and its affiliates expanded their areas of operation into central and southern Mali, Burkina Faso, and western Niger, as well as northern parts of the coastal states of Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Benin (see Map 2 below).¹¹⁷



Map 2: JNIM and ISSP areas of operations (November 2025)

Source: ACSS

Rather than a linear expansion of one group, JNIM and ISSP have formed out of mergers and splinters from each other, as well as alliances with local militias, bandits, and political actors.¹¹⁸ JNIM formed in 2017 as an alliance between al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—an official al-Qaeda branch—and several affiliated groups that were active throughout the 2010s: Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, and katiba Macina. While not initially a constituent part of JNIM, the Burkina Faso-based Ansarul Islam is, at least since January 2022, also considered an integral member of JNIM.¹¹⁹ Other *katibas* (brigades) have also

¹¹⁵ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, “The Shifting Front of Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel,” 7 April 2025.

¹¹⁶ For an overview of how al-Qaeda became entrenched and spread across the Sahel, see Caleb Weiss, “AQIM’s Imperial Playbook.”

¹¹⁷ Olivier Milland, “Prospects for EU–Côte d’Ivoire defence partnership: Local agency and views on security cooperation,” FOI Memo 8595, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency.

¹¹⁸ Weiss, “AQIM’s Imperial Playbook”; UNSC, “Thirty-third report.”

¹¹⁹ UNSC, “Thirtieth report.”

joined the coalition, including katiba Serma (a splinter from katiba Macina) and katiba Hanifa, which have been active north-central Mali and in northern Benin, respectively. ISSP is the result of a splintering from al-Mourabitoun in 2015, when some members of the group swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi while the others remained loyal to al-Qaeda.¹²⁰

Although there has been an almost consistent increase and spread of these jihadist groups since 2012, when Tuareg separatists and jihadist armed groups staged an uprising in northern Mali, their geographical expansion has accelerated since 2020.¹²¹ During this time, the Sahel has become the world's deadliest region for jihadist-related violence, with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger among the world's five countries most affected by terrorism, according to the Global Terrorism Index.¹²² It is important to emphasize, however, that these groups have formed in an extremely complex and dynamic security context, and are far from the only violent actors in this region. Others include state security forces, self-defence militias, foreign state military forces, foreign mercenaries, and ethnic militias. Since 2020, there has also been a series of coups d'état across the Sahel and a restructuring of the regional security architecture, after multinational and Western counterterrorism operations were pushed out and Western military bases were closed. These developments have created a security vacuum and further complicated the security landscape, providing both opportunities and challenges for these armed groups.

3.2 Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin

JNIM is consistently described as the principal or most significant jihadist threat in the Sahel, with its number of fighters ranging between 5,000 and 6,000 in total.¹²³ It is led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a former Malian diplomat and long-time Tuareg separatist fighter turned jihadist.¹²⁴

3.2.1 Major JNIM trends 2020–25

As mentioned, the security situation in the Sahel has become increasingly fluid since 2020, but five trends are worth highlighting here. Firstly, JNIM has significantly expanded its area of operations and its areas of control and has diversified its recruitment pool. While the group was largely pushed out of its northern strongholds by the French and UN interventions in 2013, it became entrenched in Mali's central areas in the second half of the 2010s. From there, it expanded into Burkina Faso from 2016 through its affiliate Ansarul Islam. Since 2020, the group has expanded its area of operations into southern and western Mali and across most of Burkina Faso. It has also conducted its first attacks in northern Benin and Togo, respectively, is suspected of a series of attacks in northern Côte d'Ivoire between 2020 and 2022, and has sought to expand into southwestern Niger's

¹²⁰ Al-Mourabitoun was itself a result of a merger between the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (known by its acronym in French, MUJAO), an AQIM splinter group that formed in 2011; Katibat al-Mulathimeen (The Brigade of Veiled Men); and Katibat Mouwakoune Bi-Dima (Brigade of those who sign in blood). Hédi Nsaibia, "IS Sahel's tactics cause mass, indiscriminate violence: Detailed analysis of the Islamic State's Sahel Province," 13 January 2023; Andrew Lebovich, "Primer on Jihadi Players in Algeria and Mali, Pt. 2: Belmokhtar & Those Who Sign with Blood," 20 January 2013, Jihadica.

¹²¹ The Tuareg are a nomadic group composed of various clans who reside across the Sahel, including in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. After the toppling of Gaddafi in Libya in 2011, armed Tuareg fighters who had fought as mercenaries in the Gaddafi regime returned to their homeland in northern Mali, where they staged a secessionist rebellion under the auspices of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (known by its acronym in French, MNLA). Islamist militant groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, such as the Tuareg-dominated Ansar Dine, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), took advantage of the unrest, forming an alliance with the MNLA and nearly toppling the government in Bamako. The advance was halted by the French-led Operation Serval, which deployed in 2013 at the request of the Malian government.

¹²² The other two are Pakistan and Syria; IEP, "Global Terrorism Index 2025," p. 6.

¹²³ UNSC, "Thirty-fourth report."

¹²⁴ Leela Jacinto, "Mali's whisky-drinking rebel turned Islamist chief," 12 June 2012, France 24.

Dosso region.¹²⁵ In October 2025, JNIM claimed its first attack in Nigeria close to the border with Benin.¹²⁶ In addition, in 2024, JNIM conducted its first major attack in the Malian capital, Bamako, in eight years, targeting a gendarmerie school and the international airport which, at the time, housed contingents of the Wagner group.¹²⁷ As JNIM has expanded its area of operations and control, it has also expanded its recruitment pool, either by coercing individuals into joining or tapping into local grievances. As such, recruitment has expanded to include members from the Bambara and Dogon communities, as well as communities from across the subregion, including in Ghana and Senegal.¹²⁸

The second major trend is JNIM's imposition of blockades on cities and towns across Mali, such as Timbuktu, Farabougou, Gao, Mopti, and Boni.¹²⁹ More significantly, in September 2025, JNIM imposed a fuel blockade on Bamako that, at the time of writing, was easing but still in effect.¹³⁰ Similar blockades have been imposed in the town of Djibo, northern Burkina Faso, and the group has virtually encircled the capital, Ouagadougou. The increased use of blockades against large population centres and economic hubs such as Bamako is likely an attempt to amplify the pressure on the central government or specific local authorities. Many have interpreted the blockade of Bamako as an attempt to increase public frustration that may, in turn, lead to increased political mobilisation, including among the armed forces, and push for a change of government. Few observers believe JNIM has the capacity, or even the ambition at present, to oust the junta from the capital and hold it militarily. However, the blockades do point to JNIM's expanding capabilities.

The third major dynamic is the end of the so-called "Sahelian exception" and the outbreak of war between JNIM and ISSP (at the time referred to as ISWAP-Sahel). Up until late 2019, with the exception of a clash in 2015, the Sahel had been the only place in the world where al-Qaeda- and IS-affiliates were not engaging in direct combat.¹³¹ Although the largely peaceful but fragile co-existence between the two groups broke down in 2019, and despite repeated truces, the war between JNIM and ISSP has continued to escalate during the 2020s.¹³² Several factors likely triggered the conflict. Journalist Wassim Nasr argues that because several senior members of the groups had been killed by foreign intervention forces, new guards with more maximalist and extremist views were allowed to take over

¹²⁵ Kars de Bruijne, "Conflict in the Penta-Border Area: Benin's Northern Jihad from the perspective of its neighbours," December 2022, Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations; Agence France Press, "Al-Qaeda Affiliate Claims May Attack in Togo," 3 June 2022, Voice of America; Milland, "Prospects for EU-Côte d'Ivoire defence partnership," p. 2; UNSC, "Twenty-seventh report"; Héni Nsaibia, "New frontlines: Jihadist expansion is reshaping the Benin, Niger, and Nigeria borderlands," 27 March 2025, ACLED.

¹²⁶ There were also claims that the attack could have been conducted by Ansaru; Boubacar Haidara, "Sahel terror group JNIM hits Nigeria for first time—A sign of expansion plans," 31 October 2025, The Africa Report; Yakubu Mohammed, "Al-Qaeda terror network in Sahel claims first attack in Nigeria," 31 October 2025.

¹²⁷ Benjamin Roger, "Mali: un groupe lié à Al-Qaïda revendique les attaques contre l'école de gendarmerie et l'aéroport, à Bamako," 17 September 2024, *Le Monde*.

¹²⁸ It is important to note that the recruitment of these groups had already been taking place beforehand, but the trend has escalated in recent years. UNSC, "Twenty-seventh report"; UNSC, "Twenty-eighth report"; UNSC, "Thirty-Fifth report"; Milland, "Prospects for EU-Côte d'Ivoire defence partnership."

¹²⁹ UNSC, "Thirty-fourth report"; Interview 3: Sahel expert 2; Abdou Karim Bah and Chris Ewokor, "'Business is at a standstill'—Mali jihadists' fuel blockade hits the capital," 9 October 2025, BBC News; Ladd Serwat, Héni Nsaibia, Jalale Getatchew Birru and Peter Bofin, "Africa Overview: September 2025," ACLED; Mohamed Ibrahim, "Mali crisis: Life in Timbuktu and Gao under siege by Islamist fighters," 8 October 2023, BBC; RFI, "Month-long blackout leaves Mali's Mopti in the dark amid jihadist fuel blockade," 7 November 2025.

¹³⁰ France24, "Could Bamako fall? Mali's capital under threat from al Qaeda-linked insurgents," 12 November 2025.

¹³¹ Edoardo Balduino and Yida Seydou Diall, "The End of the Sahelian Exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Clash in Central Mali" (2020), *The International Spectator*, vol. 55, no. 4, pp. 69–83; Wassim Nasr, "How Africa Has Become the Epicentre of Jihadist Activity," 4 April 2023, *Orient XXI*; Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa," July 2020, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 13, no. 7; Héni Nsaibia, "The Conflict Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel, A Year On," 15 February 2021, Italian Institute for International Political Studies.

¹³² The relationship between JNIM and ISGS is complex and changing, moving between cooperation and conflict. Balduino and Seydou Diall, "The End of the Sahelian Exception," p. 70; Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly," pp. 1–15.

and launched attacks against their former brothers-in-arms.¹³³ Some observers posit that because ISSP was formally included in the al-Furqan office, IS Central was pressuring ISWAP-Sahel to become more expansive, while others claim that ISWAP-Sahel was simply beginning to challenge JNIM for territorial control.¹³⁴ A third hypothesis, and connected to the second, is that senior leaders of katiba Macina had defected to ISWAP-Sahel, effectively challenging JNIM's authority, doctrine, and governance system in central Mali.¹³⁵ Several truces, none of which has endured, have led to temporary drops in the fighting, but clashes have continued.¹³⁶ One of the key consequences of the fighting is that the areas of operation have changed, with JNIM expanding into some areas previously controlled by ISSP (including eastern Burkina Faso), and ISSP moving into areas previously dominated by JNIM (such as the Ménaka region in Mali).

A fourth trend is JNIM's recalibrating of alliances with other non-state armed groups. JNIM has, for instance, strengthened its relations with non-jihadi Tuareg non-state armed groups in northern Mali, partly through cooperation and non-aggression pacts, but also through Tuareg armed groups joining the JNIM fold. For instance, both JNIM and the Tuareg group Strategic Framework for the Defence of the People of Azawad (CSP-DPA) claimed responsibility for the July 2024 battle of Tinzaouaten, where scores of Malian soldiers and Wagner mercenaries were killed.¹³⁷ The UN also reported in July 2024 that the leader of the Arab Movement of Azawad armed group had defected from the CSP-DPA to JNIM in March of that year.¹³⁸

A fifth dynamic relates to JNIM's modus operandi which is evolving and adapting to a changing environment. One aspect of this is JNIM's hearts-and-minds campaign, aimed at strengthening its governance and relations with local communities. JNIM has increasingly been portraying itself as a defender of local populations against the abuses committed by the Sahelian state forces and their auxiliaries. JNIM's campaign is further underscored by a marked drop in its attacks on local communities; it is instead directing the bulk of its operations against state forces and their auxiliaries. The abovementioned use of blockades is also a sign of shifting modus operandi. This follows the parallel improvement of JNIM's kinetic capabilities. JNIM is now able to launch complex attacks against fortified barracks, using a combination of reconnaissance and weaponised drones, large assaults using small arms, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).¹³⁹ Furthermore, the number of kidnappings for ransom, a long-used financing tactic, increased dramatically in 2025, with foreign nationals and businesses were being specifically targeted.¹⁴⁰ One of the most high-profile cases occurred in October, when an Emirati national was released in exchange for an alleged record sum of EUR 50 million, a large consignment of weapons, and the release of scores of JNIM fighters.¹⁴¹

Lastly, JNIM's leadership and governance system has changed in several ways. JNIM's apex leader, Iyad Ag Ghaly, while technically ranked below AQIM's leader, al-Anabi, is now increasingly assumed to be the *de facto* leader of al-Qaeda in the region. This is due to the parallel strengthening of JNIM and weakening of AQIM in Algeria. His deputy, Amadou Kouffa (*nom de guerre*) continues to lead the most active JNIM branch in Mali, wilaya Macina (previously called katiba Macina); the branch exerts significant influence

¹³³ Alexandre Jubelin and Wassim Nasr, "Mali : l'état se resserre sur Bamako [Zone d'affrontements #1]," *Le Collimateur*, Le Rubicon, 14 November 2025; Héni Nsaibia, "Newly restructured, the Islamic State in the Sahel aims for regional expansion," 30 September 2024, ACLED.

¹³⁴ Baldaro and Seydou Diall, "The End of the Sahelian Exception," p. 71; Nsaibia and Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly"; Nsaibia, "The Conflict Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel."

¹³⁵ Baldaro and Seydou Diall, "The End of the Sahelian Exception," p. 77–80.

¹³⁶ UNSC, "Thirtieth report"; UNSC, "Thirty-fourth report."

¹³⁷ Caleb Weiss, "Tuareg rebels, JNIM each claim victory over Russia's Wagner Group in Mali," 29 July 2024, FDD's Long War Journal.

¹³⁸ UNSC, "Thirty-fourth report."

¹³⁹ UNSC, "Twenty-eighth report"; UNSC, "Thirty-sixth report," p. 22.

¹⁴⁰ RFI, "Mali faces record number of kidnappings of foreigners by jihadist group," 14 November 2025.

¹⁴¹ Reuters, "Deal reached to free UAE hostage in Mali, sources say," 31 October 2025.

across central and southern Mali, including through its own governance system.¹⁴² Despite the ostensible autonomy of JNIM's constituent groups, interviewees maintain that the coalition exerts an effective command-and-control system, whereby orders are given from the top leadership and implemented by the lower-ranked katibas or cells.¹⁴³ In addition, the organisation has developed careful succession planning, which has allowed it to avoid gaps in command-and-control when some of its senior members have been killed in counter-insurgency operations over the past few years.¹⁴⁴

As mentioned above, JNIM is now increasingly positioning itself as a governance actor and an alternative to the Malian state.¹⁴⁵ It has augmented its authority in parts of Timbuktu, Ménaka, Gao, and Kidal, where it is reasserting local political influence through blockades, conflict arbitration, policing, and community dispute resolution.¹⁴⁶ As noted by the UN panel of experts, its "core ambition remains the creation of an emirate that could challenge the legitimacy of military regimes, force them to cede authority and implement sharia."¹⁴⁷ While JNIM is indeed able to govern many rural spaces, and impose its influence in urban areas under government control, most analysts seriously doubt its ability to establish an Islamic state in the medium term.¹⁴⁸

3.2.2 JNIM relations with the al-Qaeda core

According to the *Thirty-fifth report* of the UNSC's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, there was an increasing interconnection between JNIM and the al-Qaeda core, but also with other al-Qaeda branches, such as al-Shabaab in Somalia and the Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), during the reporting period.¹⁴⁹ This was in particular highlighted by bolstered propaganda activities.

Historically, AQIM and, by extension JNIM has remained close to al-Qaeda as the jihadist network's official branches in North Africa and the Sahel. Indeed, AQIM was al-Qaeda's first branch in Africa. And AQIM, more generally, ranks high among al-Qaeda's branches active today, such as al-Shabaab. Furthermore, AQIM leader al-Anabi is believed to be a senior member of al-Qaeda's so-called Hittin committee, where he promotes JNIM's strategy, which highlights JNIM's intrinsic links with the al-Qaeda core.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, several of JNIM's constituent parts, such as al-Mourabitoun, have always been close to al-Qaeda, even though they were not deemed official branches. Although al-Anabi is indeed the apex al-Qaeda leader in the region, while Ag Ghaly is the delegated authority in the Sahel, the UN panel of experts has speculated that the latter may eventually surpass al-Anabi in seniority.

This leads to the question of whether JNIM will eventually outgrow AQIM and what repercussions this will have on the global jihadi network. There are already some indications that suggest that a schism may be emerging. Throughout 2023, "JNIM [began] developing a strategy in which, while not diverging from al-Qaeda doctrine, [it was] in fact moving away from the group locally."¹⁵¹ For instance, JNIM no longer systematically uses the al-Qaeda flag in its communications or on the battlefield; rather, it displays its own banner to mark its singularity.¹⁵² Analysts This have debated whether JNIM may follow a similar path to Hayt Tahrir al-Sham in Syria, unifying various militant groups

¹⁴² UNSC, "Thirty-fifth report."

¹⁴³ Interview 2; Interview 3.

¹⁴⁴ UNSC, "Twenty-ninth report."

¹⁴⁵ UNSC, "Thirty-fifth report."

¹⁴⁶ UNSC, "Thirty-sixth report"; Interview 2.

¹⁴⁷ UNSC, "Thirty-sixth report."

¹⁴⁸ Interview 3; Interview 4: Sahel Expert 3.

¹⁴⁹ UNSC, "Thirty-fifth report."

¹⁵⁰ UNSC, "Thirtieth report"; Jake Harrington and Jared Thompson, "Zawahiri's Death and What's Next for al Qaeda," 4 August 2022, Center for Strategic and International Studies.

¹⁵¹ UNSC, "Thirty-second report," p. 9.

¹⁵² Ibid.

under a broader insurgent banner.¹⁵³ However, breaking with the al-Qaeda brand would inevitably carry costs, such as an increased risk that some members would splinter in order to remain loyal to al-Qaeda.¹⁵⁴ Another possibility is that JNIM members defect and join ISSP instead. As such, the more plausible outcome in the medium term is that JNIM remains part and parcel of the al-Qaeda brand, within which it continues to play an important role.

3.3 Islamic State in the Sahel Province

Just like JNIM, the Islamic State in Sahel Province (ISSP) is the result of various splinters and mergers across the Sahel during the 2010s. The ISSP has remained opaque for the past ten years. It originally formed in May 2015, when its founder Abu Adnan Walid al-Sahrawi and a group of senior al-Mourabitoun commanders defected and swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi, thereby forming the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).¹⁵⁵ ISGS rose to global infamy in October 2017, when four US special forces and four Nigerien soldiers were killed in an ambush on a US–Nigerien military contingent in northern Niger.¹⁵⁶ Since then, the group has grown increasingly capable, with a series of prominent attacks in late 2019 and early 2020.¹⁵⁷

Initially lacking the formal recognition of IS Central, the group did not have a dedicated media arm like other IS wilayat and conveyed many of its attack claims through French or Mauritanian media outlets.¹⁵⁸ Four years passed before ISGS was formally brought into the IS brand, but as a Sahelian branch of ISWAP (see Section 2.1) going by the name of ISWAP-Sahel. Another three years would pass before the group would graduate to become a formal IS wilaya and obtain its current name, ISSP.¹⁵⁹

3.3.1 ISSP trends 2020–25

Although it has operated largely autonomously, ISSP has fallen under the al-Furqan office since March 2019, and in the 2020s has grown to become one of the most violent and largest armed actors in the Sahel during the 2020s.¹⁶⁰ The UN assessed in 2024 that the fighting capacity of ISSP ranged between 2,000 and 3,000 fighters, more than a doubling of its estimates two years prior.¹⁶¹ This development comes despite the killing of ISSP's founder and apex leader, al-Sahrawi, in 2021, signalling the group's ability to adapt to an increasingly complex and hostile environment.

Five dynamics are highlighted below. Firstly, ISSP's area of operations has become entrenched in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, even though the group appears intent on expanding eastward into Niger and southward towards northwestern Nigeria.¹⁶² The main constraint on its expansion is the conflict with JNIM, much more than state-led counter-insurgency by Malian and Nigerien forces.¹⁶³ Despite

¹⁵³ Paul Cruickshank, "Answers from the Sahel: Wassim Nasr, Journalist, France24, on His Interview with Deputy JNIM Leader Mohamed (Amadou) Koufa," January 2025, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 18–21; Interview 3.

¹⁵⁴ Interview 4.

¹⁵⁵ Warner, "Islamic State in Africa"; Guillaume Soto-Mayor and Boubacar Ba, "Generational Warfare in the Sahel: The Khilafa Cubs and the Dynamics of Violent Insurgency within the Islamic State Province," November 2023, CRTG Working Group.

¹⁵⁶ Alistair Leithhead, "US Niger ambush: How raft of failures ended in death," 11 May 2018, BBC News; Nasr, "How Africa Has Become the Epicentre of Jihadist Activity."

¹⁵⁷ Soto-Mayor and Ba, "Generational Warfare," p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Interview 2; Warner, "Islamic State in Africa."

¹⁵⁹ UNSC, "Thirtieth report"; Héni Nsaibia, "Newly restructured."

¹⁶⁰ Interview 2.

¹⁶¹ UNSC, "Twenty-ninth report"; UNSC, "Thirty-fourth report."

¹⁶² Wassim Nasr, "West Africa After the Era of Absolute Western Deterrence," in Devorah Margolin and Aaron Y. Zelin (eds.) *Jihadist Governance and Statecraft* (2024), Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, pp. 104–111.

¹⁶³ Interview 4.

these challenges, ISSP has managed to expand in some parts of Mali, including westward to the Gao region.¹⁶⁴ In 2024, its main stronghold was assessed to be in the Ansongo–Ménaka nature reserve in northeastern Mali, along the border with Burkina Faso and Niger.¹⁶⁵ But the group has also expanded eastward into western Niger, including the regions of Tillabéri, Tahoua, and Dosso, as well as Benin, where it claimed its first attack in 2022.¹⁶⁶ The complex attack on the international airport in Niamey in January 2026, which was claimed by ISSP, confirmed the deteriorating security outlook in the capital, which had been observed for some time. In 2025, there were several successful and attempted kidnappings for ransom, specifically targeting foreign nationals in areas close to zones with a high security force presence.¹⁶⁷ The latest attack only reinforced this threat, given the choice of target, a fortified international airport and military airbase, and the complexity of the tactics used.

In the same vein as JNIM, ISSP has managed to expand its area of operations by forming alliances with or co-opting local militias or coercing civilians, including children, into its ranks.¹⁶⁸ One such alliance appears to be with the so-called Lakurawa, who have been conducting attacks in southern Niger and northwestern Nigeria’s Kebbi and Sokoto states in the name of ISSP since the second semester of 2024.¹⁶⁹ In addition, multiple reports indicate that elements of ISWAP participated in the attack on Niamey airport, which would indicate a strengthened partnership between the two groups within the al-Furqan office. Another way in which ISSP has been able to expand is through defections from JNIM to ISSP. In February 2026, a senior JNIM commander in eastern Burkina Faso did precisely that, accusing JNIM of failing to adequately implement sharia and of entering into non-aggression pacts with Côte d’Ivoire and Benin.¹⁷⁰ ISSP expansion in the region correlates with several factors. One of these is the appointment since at least 2022 of ISSP’s new leader, Abu Aba al-Bara al-Sahrawi (*nom de guerre*). Another is the end of a truce with the Nigerien state in 2023, as well as repeated bouts of fighting between ISSP and JNIM.¹⁷¹

The second major dynamic is that ISSP is seeking to become a more relevant governance actor, with a more rationalised and structured. Signs of this became more evident after the organisation graduated to become an independent IS province in 2022, after which there was a notable shift in the nature of its attacks on civilian communities, particularly in areas under its control.¹⁷² Such attacks were often carried out as reprisals and punishment for cooperating with the ISSP’s adversaries, and the shift away from such tactics suggests an ambition to win hearts and minds in order to be able to govern and tax local communities and recruit new fighters.¹⁷³ Like ISWAP and as part of efforts to strengthen its governance credentials, the ISSP has imposed a hierarchical structure and military command with responsibilities across five operational zones, concentrated in the tri-border area

¹⁶⁴ Interview 4; UNSC, “Thirty-first report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” 13 February 2023,” p. 9.

¹⁶⁵ UNSC, “Twenty-fifth report”; UNSC, “Thirty-fourth report”; Nsaibia, “Newly restructured, the Islamic State in the Sahel aims for regional expansion.”

¹⁶⁶ Nsaibia, “Newly restructured.”

¹⁶⁷ Matteo Maillard, “Niger: un Américain enlevé par des hommes armés en plein cœur de Niamey,” 22 October 2025, Jeune Afrique.

¹⁶⁸ Nsaibia, “Newly restructured”; Soto-Mayor and Ba, “Generational Warfare.”

¹⁶⁹ The composition and ambition of the Lakurawa have been a subject of recurring debate over the past few years. The term can refer to a group called the Lakurawa that arrived in northern Nigeria from Mali to provide protection to local farmers from bandits and herder raids, or, more loosely, to any self-defence group operating in northern Nigeria. It is therefore extremely hard to ascertain whether there is a formal alliance between ISSP and the more structured group called Lakurawa or if it is rather a case of ISSP using local self-defence groups as contractors for specific tasks; UNSC, “Thirty-fifth report,” p. 6.

¹⁷⁰ Brant Philip, Post on X from 15 February 2026.

¹⁷¹ UNSC, “Thirty-first report”.

¹⁷² Nsaibia, “Newly restructured.”

¹⁷³ UNSC, “Thirty-third report”; UNSC, “Thirty-fourth report.”

mentioned above, each presided over by an *emir* (commander or local chief).¹⁷⁴ In line with other IS-affiliates, ISSP also looks to establish a clear and hierarchical bureaucracy, overseen by a Shura council and a wali (governor), a role currently held by al-Sahrawi.¹⁷⁵ The second layer is made up of a law and sanctions office, which includes the *hisbah* (police) and *qadis* (judges), and separate offices for military operations, logistics, and foreign fighters.¹⁷⁶ The third level reflects the five operational zones mentioned above. The bureaucratisation of ISSP, however, is sometimes more an expression of intent than a reflection of reality on the ground, as reflected in its uneven success in imposing itself across regions.¹⁷⁷

Thirdly, ISSP's leadership has changed from a top layer dominated by Arab ethnicities predominantly from Western Sahara, and lower ranks dominated by the Fulani ethnic group, to one of greater ethnic diversity adapted to the areas in which it operates.¹⁷⁸ Rank-and-file members are now reported from such ethnic groups as Fulani, Tuareg, Dawsahak, Songhai, and Djerma communities.¹⁷⁹ However, both al-Bara al-Sahrawi and his deputy are of Arab origin.¹⁸⁰ One of the key drivers of this diversification appears to be the killing of its leaders by French airstrikes at the beginning of the decade, as well as successful operations by Malian armed forces and Wagner in more recent years.¹⁸¹ Fighters, including child soldiers, are now being recruited from various ethnic groups in the areas where ISSP is present, although there is little to suggest the group is attracting fighters from outside these regions. In addition to the expanded recruitment pool, in-fighting or factional friction is reported by several sources, which may signal emerging challenges, such as barriers to its governance system or potential splinters.¹⁸²

A fourth dynamic is ISSP's increased capabilities, both kinetic and communicative. After a hiatus since 2021, the UN panel of experts noted a reappearance of IEDs used in complex attacks during the first half of 2024.¹⁸³ Other sources have also alleged that ISSP resumed its use of suicide-vehicle-borne IEDs in attacks claimed later that year, which further underscores this capability boost.¹⁸⁴ In addition, ISSP also appears to have strengthened its communications and propaganda efforts. This is highlighted by ISSP's more extensive inclusion in IS's Arabic newsletter *al-Naba*, the dissemination of the clarified organisational structure mentioned above, and the celebration of child soldiers as a way to attract new recruits. Another indication of its strengthened external communications is the appearance of ISSP cells outside its area of operations. During the first half of 2025, Moroccan authorities dismantled one cell, arresting several suspects in nine cities, who were allegedly planning attacks on "sensitive sites and foreign interests" and were apparently directed by an IS operative in Ménaka, an ISSP stronghold.¹⁸⁵

3.3.2 ISSP's relations with the IS core

The extent to which ISSP maintains an operational relationship with the IS core is debated. While the UN panel of experts has assessed that ISGS has had "direct contacts with ISIL

¹⁷⁴ Nsaibia, "Newly restructured"; Nsaibia, "IS Sahel's tactics."

¹⁷⁵ Nsaibia, "Newly restructured."

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ The Fulani (also referred to as Peuhl, Peul, Fula or Fulbe) are a pastoralist community with various clans and subgroups residing across most of the Sahelian strip, but are most preponderant in the western Sahel.

¹⁷⁹ Soto-Mayor and Ba, "Generational Warfare"; UNSC, "Thirty-first report."

¹⁸⁰ UNSC, "Thirty-second report," p. 10; Nsaibia, "Newly restructured."

¹⁸¹ Nsaibia, "IS Sahel's tactics."

¹⁸² Soto-Mayor and Ba, "Generational Warfare," p. 4.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁸⁴ Interview 4; Critical Threats, "Africa File, June 27, 2024: Niger Reallocates Uranium Mine; IS Strengthens in the Sahel; AU Future in Somalia," 27 June 2024.

¹⁸⁵ UNSC, "Thirty-sixth report," p. 11.

core,” others are more doubtful.¹⁸⁶ Nevertheless, indications suggest that the links between the groups have strengthened in recent years, through an enhanced logistical and financial relationship with ISWAP.¹⁸⁷ The shift appears to have followed the death of ISGS’s founding leader, Abu Adnan Walid al-Sahrawi, in 2021 and the ISSP becoming recognised as a wilaya in its own right a year later. Journalist Wassim Nasr, for instance, explains that ISIS leader al-Baghdadi did not fully trust al-Sahrawi due to his historical ties to AQIM (at the time, ISGS appears to have continued to coordinate its operations with JNIM).¹⁸⁸ The ISIS leader, Nasr elaborates, wanted to avoid committing the same mistake as he had made in Syria, where the current Syrian president and then-jihadist fighter Ahmed al-Sharaa (whose former *nom de guerre* was Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani) had in 2013 refused to join ISIS. He instead pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda and subsequently formed the militant group Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).¹⁸⁹ Since al-Sahrawi’s death, ISWAP-Sahel and later ISSP has featured more extensively in IS newsletters *Amaq* and *al-Naba*.¹⁹⁰ Furthermore, Soto-Mayor and Ba speculate that ISWAP may also have advocated for a “stricter adherence to ideological doctrines and operational directives” by ISSP.¹⁹¹

While there is little doubt that ISSP has received training and increased capabilities from external actors, such as ISWAP, the insurgency remains inherently driven by local dynamics, as demonstrated above. The group has not, as of yet, conducted or demonstrated a capability to carry out complex and high-impact attacks outside its area of operations. Nevertheless, the increased cooperation with ISWAP may signal a growing ability to do so in the medium term. In addition, the dismantling of cells loyal to ISSP and allegedly directed by individuals in the Sahel does indicate an ambition to conduct out-of-area operations over the same timeframe. Furthermore, recruitment motivations appear to be anchored in top-down coercion or bottom-up social justice. It is concerning, nevertheless, that ISSP is ostensibly seeking to expand southwards and eastwards, and that it is co-opting local groups in northern Nigeria. While one must be careful not to fall into the alarmist narratives of an arc of jihadist violence stretching from the Lake Chad to the Sahel, the very fact that groups from both these regions are now converging on the border region between Benin, Niger, and Nigeria signals that the region could become a future hotspot. But even in such a scenario, ISSP will likely continue to remain locally ingrained, drawing upon local grievances to drive its recruitment and expanding its area of operations. But it will likely continue to face competition from such groups as JNIM or any of its potential affiliates in the region, such as Ansaru.

Although ISSP as an organisation is unlikely to conduct or command attacks outside its area of operations, the possibility of ISSP inspiring lone-wolf attacks cannot be discounted. The appearance of ISSP loyalists in Morocco may be more than a red herring, particularly when seen in a broader geopolitical context.

¹⁸⁶ Soto-Mayor and Ba, “Generational Warfare,” p. 3.

¹⁸⁷ UNSC, “Twenty-sixth report,” p. 11; Soto-Mayor and Boubacar Ba, “Generational Warfare in the Sahel,” p. 3.

¹⁸⁸ Nasr, “How Africa Has Become.”

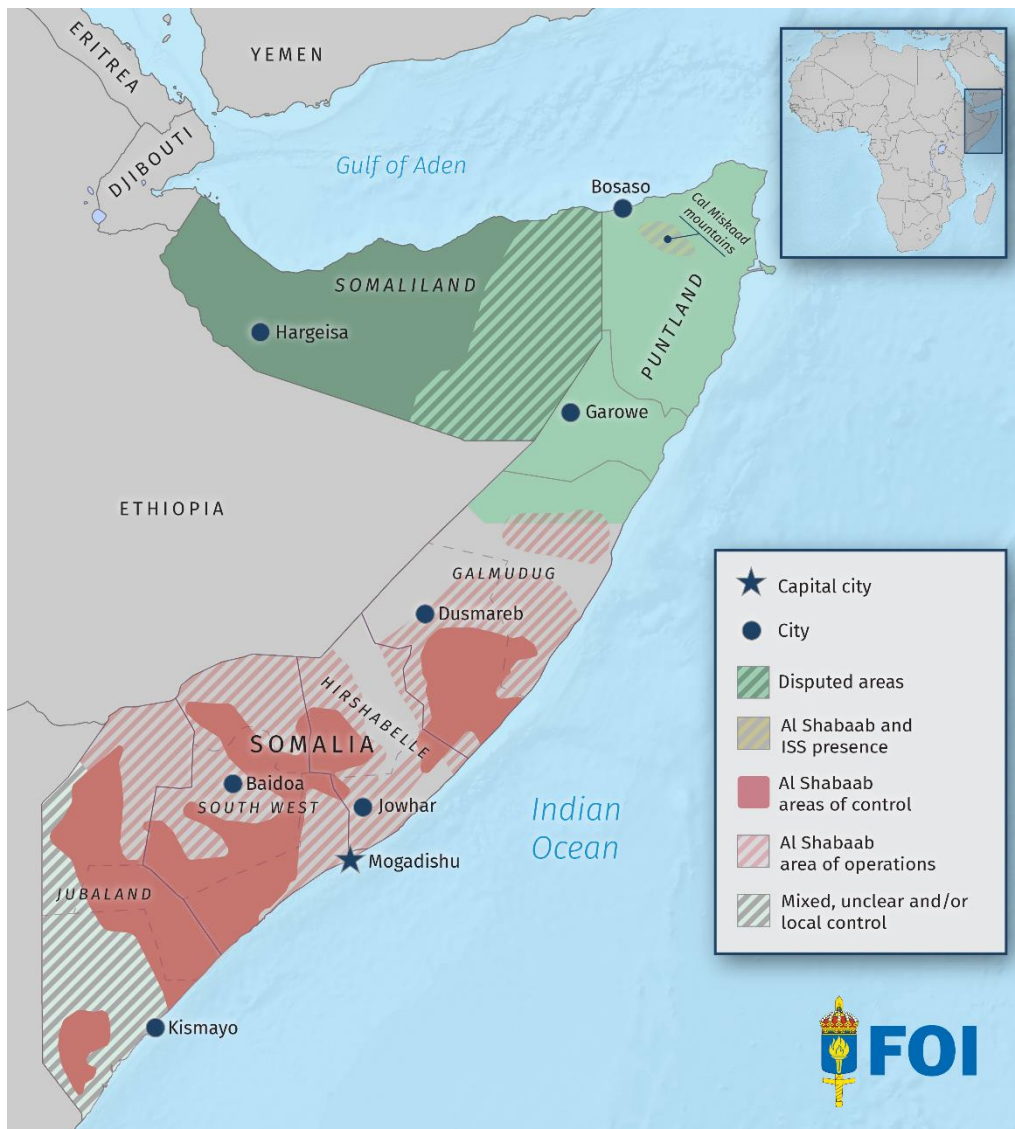
¹⁸⁹ Nasr, “How Africa Has Become”; Soto-Mayor and Boubacar Ba, “Generational Warfare in the Sahel,” p. 3.

¹⁹⁰ Soto-Mayor and Boubacar Ba, “Generational Warfare in the Sahel,” p. 3.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

4 Somalia

Somalia has been affected by jihadist violence for over 20 years. This chapter describes the evolution of the two most active Somalia-based jihadist organisations: the al-Qaeda-affiliated *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen* (hereafter al-Shabaab) and Islamic State in Somalia (ISS) (see Map 3 below). The former emerged in the post-civil war context of the Islamic Courts Union in the early 2000s, while the latter was formed as an al-Shabaab splinter in 2015.



Map 3: Al-Shabaab and ISS areas of operations and control (as of March 2025)

Source: EU Agency for Asylum

4.1 Al-Shabaab

In 2022, the then-head of United States Africa Command, Army General Stephen Townsend, described al-Shabaab as the “largest, wealthiest and most lethal al-Qaeda affiliate in the world.”¹⁹² In the same vein, the expert panel of the UN Security Council’s sanctions committee concerning al-Shabaab has described the group as “the most

¹⁹² Major A.J. Ruggieri, “Department of State and Defense officials meet for 2022 East African Security Forum,” 16 May 2022, United States Africa Command.

significant threat to peace and security in Somalia.”¹⁹³ Like its counterparts in the Lake Chad region and the Sahel, al-Shabaab ultimately aims to take control of Somalia, eject foreign military forces, and establish a fundamentalist Islamic state, based on its strict interpretation of Sharia.¹⁹⁴ The organisation already controls large parts of central and southern Somalia, where it has implemented a governance system for many years, but its influence stretches outside the areas it controls through a hybrid governance system from which it is able to extract funding, intelligence, and political influence.¹⁹⁵ In many ways, al-Shabaab is perceived by segments of the population as a more legitimate and rationalised actor than the state and has been a conduit for Somali nationalism going beyond intra- and inter-clan cleavages.¹⁹⁶ Like the *yusuffiyya* movement by Lake Chad (see Section 2.1), al-Shabaab also deems democracy a “religion for non-Muslims” and sees it as its duty to combat it by all means.¹⁹⁷ Its adversaries and main targets are therefore those entities supporting democracy and opposing al-Shabaab’s long-term aim, including federal and state-level authorities, as well as foreign states that contribute troops or other kinds of security support to the Somali authorities.¹⁹⁸

Al-Shabaab rose to prominence in 2006 within the so-called Islamic Courts Union that had formed during the early 2000s, but the group traces its roots to jihadist insurgencies active in Somalia in the 1980s and 1990s as well as Afghanistan.¹⁹⁹ In 2012, al-Shabaab’s then-leader, Ahmed Abdi Godane, swore allegiance to al-Qaeda.²⁰⁰ The group’s 20-year-long history, during which time its demise has been repeatedly predicted, testifies to its resilience and adaptability to a changing security and political environment.²⁰¹ Even though al-Shabaab was pushed out of the capital, Mogadishu, in 2011, the organisation has remained entrenched in Somalia’s central and southern regions of Middle- and Lower Juba, Middle and Lower Shabelle, Hiran, Bay, Bakool, Galguduud, and Mudug (see Map 3 above).²⁰²

4.1.1 Al-Shabaab trends 2020–25

During the 2020s, al-Shabaab remained active in the above-mentioned regions and continues to hold large territories in the south and to exert control and hybrid governance even in areas under state control. Although the threat has largely remained stable, four main trends can be observed over the past five years.

Firstly, al-Shabaab has lost and regained some territories, underscoring the group’s resilience and adaptability. Only a few months after taking office, in August 2022, Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud ordered a two-pronged, multi-phase offensive, this

¹⁹³ Sanaa Elhakim et al., “Letter dated 17 September 2024 from the Panel of Experts pursuant resolution 2713 (2023) addressed to the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolution 2713 (2023) concerning Al-Shabaab,” United Nations Security Council.

¹⁹⁴ Matt Byden, “Somalia at Risk of Becoming a Jihadist State,” November 2025, *Africa Security Brief*, no.45, African Center for Strategic Studies, p. 13.

¹⁹⁵ Robert Kluijver, “Al Shabaab governance: Illiberal modernization?” 2025, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*.

¹⁹⁶ Kluijver, “Al Shabaab governance.”

¹⁹⁷ Jamal Osman, “Inside Al Shabaab: The extremist group trying to seize Somalia,” 15 June 2022, Channel 4/ Youtube.

¹⁹⁸ UNSC, “Twenty-eighth report,” p. 9;

¹⁹⁹ The ICU was a merger of several sharia courts in Mogadishu amid the post-civil war chaos brought by the toppling of dictator Siad Barre in 1991, during which time clan militias controlled large parts of the capital and other areas. Most accounts say that al-Shabaab was formed in 2006, but some accounts allege that it was created as early as 2002; Stig Jarle Hansen, “The Harakat al-Shabaab: From Territoriality to Semi-Territoriality,” in *The Horn, Sahel, and the Rift: Fault-lines of the African jihad*, London: Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., pp. 163–184; Kluijver, “Al Shabaab governance,” p. 17–18; Osman, “Inside Al Shabaab.”

²⁰⁰ BBC News, “Somalia’s al-Shabaab join al-Qaeda,” 10 February 2012.

²⁰¹ Stig Jarle Hansen, “Can Somalia’s New Offensive Defeat al-Shabaab?” January 2023, *CTC Sentinel*, vol.12, issue 1, pp. 19–24.

²⁰² Christopher Anzalone, “A Retrospective and Future Look at al-Shabaab’s Governance,” in Devorah Margolin and Aaron Y. Zelin (eds.) *Jihadist Governance and Statecraft* (2024), Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, pp. 23–29; Anna Ida Rock, “En utdragen exit—Somalias säkerhetssituation efter AMISOM,” June 2022, Swedish Defence Research Agency.

time led by the Somali National Army (SNA).²⁰³ Unlike previous offensives against al-Shabaab, this first phase was led by the SNA.²⁰⁴ The SNA also benefited from an ongoing armed uprising against al-Shabaab by the so-called Macawiisley (or Maawisley) clan militias and received air support from US and Turkish drone strikes, which helped push out al-Shabaab from more than 200 locations in central Somalia's Hiraan and Galgaduud regions.²⁰⁵ The offensive initially generated some optimism, as it was based on a two-pronged approach seeking to degrade al-Shabaab militarily and by choking off its revenue streams.²⁰⁶

However, beginning in 2023, the offensive slowed and al-Shabaab started to reverse many of the advances made by the government. Among the factors raised by observers to explain this reversal are not only uncertainty about funding and operational support from regional powers in the second phase of the offensive, unrealistically ambitious plans by the Somali government, growing friction among clans and local leaders, but also al-Shabaab's tactical retreats and counterattacks.²⁰⁷ Moreover, in February 2025, al-Shabaab launched its own counteroffensive against the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), first in rural areas in the Middle Shabelle region and within Mogadishu, using various tactics.²⁰⁸ These include coordinated attacks using suicide-vehicle-borne IEDs followed by fighter assaults, remote-controlled IEDs, targeted assassinations, and mortar fire.²⁰⁹ Among some of its most prominent attacks during the reporting period was an attempt in March 2025 to assassinate the president while his convoy was moving through Mogadishu.²¹⁰

Secondly, al-Shabaab has significantly boosted its ranks despite the FGS offensive. According to the UN panel of experts, al-Shabaab had between 10,000 and 18,000 fighters as of July 2025, 42–66 per cent more than two years earlier.²¹¹ That is nearly the equivalent fighting capacity of the SNA's 19,000, although the SNA's exact numbers are disputed.²¹² However, it is important to note that these are estimates and not exact figures. Nevertheless, they serve as an indication of perceptions of current group strength. Analysts are divided about what has driven this increase. One line of argument is that the new estimates reflect a readjustment of the UN panel of experts' previously underestimated numbers, even though the panel also notes an increased recruitment drive.²¹³ Another is that al-Shabaab has indeed increased its ranks, thanks to territories recaptured from the FGS since 2024.²¹⁴

Thirdly, al-Shabaab appears to have significantly increased its revenue-generation capabilities. Although the group has long been virtually self-sustaining, the UN panel of experts assesses that al-Shabaab has increased its revenues from a range of USD 12 million to USD 120 million generated annually in 2022, to a range of USD 100 million to

²⁰³ UNSC, "Thirty-First report"; Daisy Muibu, "Somalia's Stalled Offensive Against al-Shabaab: Taking Stock of Obstacles," February 2024, *CTC Sentinel*, vol.17, issue 2, pp. 18–26;

²⁰⁴ Hansen, "Can Somalia's New Offensive," p. 20.

²⁰⁵ Ashley Jackson, "Flailing State: The Resurgence of al-Shabaab in Somalia," 3 June 2025, War on the Rocks; Muibu, "Somalia's Stalled Offensive"; ACLED, "Somalia Situation Update: April 2023, Counter-insurgency Operation Gains Regional Support in Phase Two"; Samira Gaid, "The 2022 Somali Offensive Against al-Shabaab: Making Enduring Gains Will Require Learning from Previous Failures," November/December 2022, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 15, no. 11.

²⁰⁶ Hansen, "Can Somalia's New Offensive," p. 20–21.

²⁰⁷ Daisy Muibu and Yayedior Mbengue, "Somalia at a Crossroads: Resurgent Insurgents, Fragmented Politics, and the Uncertain Future of AUSSOM," May 2025, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 18, issue 5, pp. 1–11.

²⁰⁸ UNSC, "Thirty-sixth report."

²⁰⁹ Muibu and Mbengue, "Somalia at a Crossroads," May 2025, *CTC Sentinel*.

²¹⁰ Mohamed Dhaysane, "Somali president survives al-Shabaab assassination attempt, officials say," 18 March 2025, Anadolu Agency.

²¹¹ UNSC, "Thirty-first report."

²¹² International Institute for Security Studies, "Chapter Eight: Sub-Saharan Africa," (2025), *The Military Balance*, vol. 125, no.1, p. 496; Paul D. Williams, "Building the Somali National Army: Anatomy of a failure, 2008–2018," (2020), *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 366–391; Rock, "En utdragen exit," p. 3.

²¹³ Interview 7: Somalia expert 1; UNSC, "Thirty-fourth report."

²¹⁴ Interview 8: Somalia expert 2.

USD 200 million in 2025.²¹⁵ Al-Shabaab is well-known for its diverse and well-managed revenue-generation system, relying on *zakat* and various types of taxes on businesses and individuals both inside and outside its areas of control. But it is unclear whether the increase is due to raised taxes or to an extension of the taxbase through the recapture of new areas. In addition, the increase also signals al-Shabaab's ability to avoid and repeatedly adapt to the government's efforts to clamp down on the group's revenue generation. The implications of the revenue increase are clear. Above all, it allows al-Shabaab to significantly ramp up its military operations against the government and to extend its influence-operations in government-held areas. One probable direct consequence of this is that al-Shabaab will be able to buy not only weapons in larger volumes but also more sophisticated types of weapons. About a quarter of its operational funds is believed to be used for acquiring weapons, while the rest is used for funding operations and its governance system.²¹⁶

These weapon purchases lead us on to the fourth trend: al-Shabaab's growing engagement with the Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a historical ally, and the Iran-backed militant group Ansar Allah (commonly referred to as the Houthis).²¹⁷ While the relationship with the Houthis appears to be mainly opportunistic and transactional rather than ideological, the relationship carries several possible implications. The first is that it may allow al-Shabaab to acquire more advanced weaponry, given that the Houthis already have anti-ship cruise missiles and medium-range ballistic missiles within their arsenal.²¹⁸ Furthermore, according to the UN expert panel, the Houthis provided al-Shabaab with technical instructions during the same period it received weapons shipments, that is, between June and September 2024. In the same vein, al-Shabaab has sent more than a dozen fighters to AQAP for training in UAV technology. While it is well known that al-Shabaab has used surveillance UAVs for several years, there are no signs yet that it has weaponised any drones.²¹⁹ Nevertheless, looking at AQAP's increased capabilities, including weaponised drones and drone jammers, it is conceivable that al-Shabaab will also acquire comparable capabilities in the medium term.²²⁰

4.1.2 Al-Shabaab's relation to the al-Qaeda core

Although al-Shabaab has long been an expression of Somali nationalistic sentiment, the group also maintains strong links with the al-Qaeda core. The UN panel of experts notes that al-Shabaab's leader Ahmed Diryie (*nom de guerre* Abu Ubaidah) has climbed within the al-Qaeda hierarchy, becoming the third-most senior leader within its so-called Hittin Committee and therefore a theoretical (albeit at this point unlikely) candidate to lead the global network.²²¹ In addition, al-Shabaab has strengthened its relations with its Yemeni affiliate AQAP through weapons trade and training. Hundreds of al-Shabaab fighters are reported to have travelled to Yemen for training.²²² Also, al-Shabaab uses extensive al-Qaeda symbolism within its communications. As jihadism researcher Caleb Weiss notes in an analysis of a 2024 propaganda video, the group includes several propaganda points that place it well within the al-Qaeda camp. One is the announcement of a new special forces' unit, whose members will graduate from a "military academy" named after Usama ben Laden, the founder of al-Qaeda.²²³ The same video also makes several references to

²¹⁵ UNSC, "Thirty-fifth report"; UNSC, "Twenty-ninth report."

²¹⁶ UNSC, "Thirty-sixth report," p. 10.

²¹⁷ UNSC, "Thirty-first report"; UNSC, "Thirtieth report"; UNSC, "Thirty-sixth report."

²¹⁸ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Expanding Al-Shabaab-Houthi Ties Escalate Security Threats to Red Sea Region," 28 May 2025.

²¹⁹ Interview 7; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Expanding Al-Shabaab-Houthi."

²²⁰ UNSC, "Thirty-sixth report."

²²¹ UNSC, "Thirtieth report," p. 6.

²²² UNSC, "Thirty-sixth report," p. 15.

²²³ Caleb Weiss, "Shabaab advertises creation of 'special forces' unit," 19 June 2024, FDD's Long War Journal; Harun Maruf, X post from 19 June 2024.

historical al-Qaeda leaders as well as the leader of the Taliban, while al-Shabaab rages against Israel's war in Gaza, in line with other al-Qaeda outfits.

Despite al-Shabaab's strong connections to the al-Qaeda brand, the organisation itself remains highly localised and autonomous. A small minority of combatants are thought to be recruited from outside of Somalia, such as the Somali diaspora community or the surrounding region.²²⁴ While the group has indeed expanded to border areas in northern Kenya or eastern Ethiopia, it has shown uneven ambition and capability to retain control of those areas. The last major al-Shabaab attack outside its stronghold in southern Somalia occurred in January 2019 when gunmen staged a complex assault on the 14 Riverside Drive hotel and conference centre in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi. But smaller attacks occur with some regularity in the Lamu and Mandera counties of northeastern Kenya. It is deemed to have limited capacity to attack inside Ethiopia.²²⁵

4.2 Islamic State in Somalia

The Islamic State in Somalia (ISS) formed in 2015 after several senior al-Shabaab members, including ISS-leader Abdulqadir Mumin, defected and swore allegiance to ISIS. IS Central formally recognised it as a wilaya in 2017.²²⁶ For many years it has remained concentrated in its strongholds in the Cal Miskaad Mountains in Puntland (see Map 3), a semi-autonomous state in northern Somalia, but there are indications the group may also be active in Mogadishu.²²⁷ Its ranks have not exceeded more than a few hundred (at its height 600–800 combatants), which has limited its kinetic capabilities. Instead, it has built a strong criminal network in and around the port city of Bosaso, where it has been able to extort local and foreign businesses.

4.2.1 ISS trends 2020–25

During the 2020s, the group has experienced significant changes. Firstly, the group has become a key wilaya within the broader IS structure.²²⁸ The clearest sign of this is the ascent of Mumin within the global IS hierarchy.²²⁹ In 2024 and early 2025, there was extensive speculation and debate over whether Mumin was in fact Abu Hafsa al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, the secretive new caliph of ISIS.²³⁰ This came after unsubstantiated claims by unnamed US intelligence sources, quoted in media reporting in 2024, as well as speculation and debate within the UN panel of experts' reports throughout 2024 and 2025.²³¹ Nevertheless, many observers have doubted the accuracy of the claim.²³² A dominant line of argument is based on ISIS's inherently Middle Eastern identity, leadership, and succession process, whereby the apex leader must be a descendant of the leading tribe in Mecca at the time of the Prophet Mohammed, the Quraysh, considered

²²⁴ While al-Shabaab initially did attract many foreign fighters, primarily from the Somali diaspora, this began to change during the 2010s and is therefore not discussed in this report.

²²⁵ Stig Jarle Hansen, "Will al-Shabaab get stronger in Ethiopia? Two reasons why it's unlikely," 2 December 2024, *The Conversation*.

²²⁶ Lucas Webber and Daniele Garofalo, "The Islamic State Somalia Propaganda Coalition's Regional Language Push," April 2023, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 16, issue 4.

²²⁷ International Crisis Group (ICG), "The Islamic State in Somalia: Responding to an Evolving Threat," 12 September 2024, *Africa Briefing* no. 201.

²²⁸ UNSC, "Thirty-fourth report."

²²⁹ ICG, "The Islamic State in Somalia."

²³⁰ At the same time, there was speculation that it was rather the Iraq-based ISIS leader, Abdallah Makki Muslih al Rifai, who was killed in March 2025, who was the caliph of the GDP and/or the global terrorist network. See Seth Frantzman and Bill Roggio, "US strike in Iraq eliminates top Islamic State leader," 15 March 2025, *FDD's Long War Journal*.

²³¹ Courtney Kube, "Global leader of ISIS targeted and possibly killed in U.S. airstrike," 15 June 2024, *NBC News*; UNSC, "Thirty-fifth report," p. 3; "Thirty-sixth report," p. 5

²³² Caleb Weiss and Lucas Webber, "Islamic State-Somalia: A Growing Global Terror Concern," September 2024, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 17, no. 8, pp. 12–21.

among the most prestigious in the Muslim world.²³³ Another is that relocating the ISIS base to an African country such as Somalia would admit defeat in the group's historical heartlands in Iraq and Syria, which would likely diminish its appeal among Muslims in other regions.²³⁴ Even though Mumin is unlikely to be the caliph, most experts agree that ISS and the al-Karrar office (see Section 2.2.1), and therefore also Mumin, has risen within the de facto IS hierarchy. Some have suggested that it is more plausible that he is the most senior-ranking leader of the General Directorate of Provinces (GDP).²³⁵ However, not being the caliph would not diminish his influence within the organisation per se. Given that the GDP has acquired a central delegating role within the broader IS network since its creation in 2019 and the *de facto* decentralisation of the organisation through the wilayat system, this would effectively make Mumin the "operational leader" or "primary decision-maker" of Islamic State.²³⁶

But beyond the discussion about Mumin's leadership status within the IS hierarchy, there are other clear indications pointing to ISS's growing importance within the IS constellation. Indeed, al-Karrar has been acting as the regional command for ISS, Islamic State in Central Africa Province (also known as the Allied Democratic Forces, ISCAP), based in the war-torn east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and *Ahlu al-Sunnah wal-Jamaah* (also known as Islamic State in Mozambique, ASJ), based in northern Mozambique, since the GDP was established in 2019.²³⁷ This relationship has facilitated the growth of both ISCAP and ASJ, particularly at the turn of the decade. As one of the most profitable IS affiliates, ISS has also acted as a financing hub between various IS groups; it has acted as a funding channel between IS Central and ISCAP and ASJ, and it has provided funds to other wilayat such as Islamic State in Khorosan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan and Pakistan.²³⁸ This financial strength comes from an extensive extortion racket across the region, primarily in and around Bosaso. In 2024, the UN panel of experts estimated that the al-Karrar office could generate as much as USD 360,000 per month.²³⁹

The second notable trend observed through 2025 was that ISS's capabilities and capacities had increased, especially since 2023.²⁴⁰ One driver was a notable increase in the number of foreign fighters, particularly from the East Africa subregion, as well as battle-hardened fighters from North Africa and the Middle East.²⁴¹ These fighters were assessed as comprising about 50 per cent of the total, while the remaining were believed to be predominantly Somali, mainly from the Ali Salebaan sub-clan of the Darod/Majerteen.²⁴² ISS's ranks increased significantly in 2024, during which time the number of fighters nearly doubled.²⁴³ In its *Thirty-sixth report*, the UN panel of experts described a late-2024 pre-emptive attack by ISS on a base of Puntland security forces, "in anticipation of a large-scale military counteroffensive supported by international partners" (most likely the US

²³³ The Prophet Mohammed was himself from the Bani Hashim clan, which was one of ten such clans making up the Quraysh tribe; Jason Warner, "Is the Islamic State's leadership moving to Africa? Not so fast," 16 February 2024, Modern War Institute.

²³⁴ Warner, "Is the Islamic State's"; Omar Dhabien, "The Centrality of Iraq and Syria to the Islamic State's Caliphate," 13 February 2025, Jihadica.

²³⁵ Weiss and Webber, "Islamic State-Somalia," p. 13; Austin Doctor and Gina Ligon, "The Death of an Islamic State Global Leader in Africa?" July/August 2024, CTC Sentinel, vol. 17, no. 7, p. 26.

²³⁶ Weiss and Webber, "Islamic State-Somalia," p. 13; Hamming, "The General Directorate," p. 20.

²³⁷ Caleb Weiss, Ryan O'Farrell, Tara Candland, and Laren Poole, "Fatal Transactions: The Funding Behind the Islamic State's Central Africa Province," June 2023, Program on Extremism at George Washington University and Bridgeway Foundation; Jacob Zenn, "Al-Shabaab versus the Islamic State in Somalia Province: Why only al-Qaeda's affiliate remains unrivalled," March 2023, Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 7–11; ICG, "The Islamic State in Somalia," p. 5.

²³⁸ UNSC, "Thirty-first report," p. 8; UNSC, "Thirty-sixth report," p. 19; Warner, "Is the Islamic State's leadership moving to Africa?"

²³⁹ UNSC, "Thirty-fourth report," p. 10.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.; UNSC, "Thirty-fifth report," p. 9.

²⁴¹ UNSC, "Thirty-fourth report," p. 10; UNSC, "Thirty-fifth report," p. 9; ICG, "The Islamic State in Somalia"; Weiss and Webber, "Islamic State-Somalia," pp. 16–17.

²⁴² ICG, "The Islamic State in Somalia," p. 3 and p. 6.

²⁴³ UNSC, "Thirty-fifth report," p. 9.

and the United Arab Emirates).²⁴⁴ According to the panel, the attack was almost entirely led by foreign fighters of Arab origin, mostly from North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, who staged the initial assault. African-origin fighters, nevertheless, participated in the ensuing battles, the panel explains. Despite the temporary influx of foreign fighters, ISS remained small in comparison to al-Shabaab and ISWAP. Another driver, and likely as a result of the influx of Arab fighters and trainers, was that ISS's kinetic capabilities grew more sophisticated, highlighted by a greater share of attacks using IEDs.²⁴⁵ For instance, ISS targeted state security forces to a larger degree and took control of territory previously held by al-Shabaab, which signalled a growing ability and confidence to do so. However, the territorial gains over al-Shabaab should also be seen against the backdrop of the SNA's offensive against al-Shabaab in central Somalia, during which time the al-Qaeda-affiliated group is believed to have focused its attention on fighting the FGS in the central and southern regions.²⁴⁶

Thirdly, and in response to the previous two changes, ISS came under intense pressure from the end of 2024 and throughout 2025, due to an offensive led by Puntland security forces, benefitting from air support from the US and the UAE.²⁴⁷ The offensive led to significant losses of fighters, due to fatalities as well as many arrests.²⁴⁸ But ISS has allegedly also lost a significant share of its foreign fighters because of defections and recruitment challenges due to the very harsh living conditions in the Cal Miskaad Mountains and to cultural barriers that have made it difficult to integrate into narrow clan-based structures.²⁴⁹ Two interviewees confirmed the Puntland authorities' claim that nearly 90 per cent of ISS-controlled territory has been retaken, underscoring its significant losses.²⁵⁰ However, they also warn that unless the pressure is maintained to completely eradicate the threat, there is a real chance that ISS may regroup. The state and health of Mumin remained unknown at the time of writing. Furthermore, the International Crisis Group warned in 2024 that the lack of a formal defector programme in Puntland meant that ISS fighters have little ability to quit, which may instead leave them few alternatives to remain in the group.²⁵¹

4.2.2 ISS's relations with the IS core

Among the Africa-based IS provinces, Islamic State Somalia appears to be the most paradoxical. While it is clearly the smallest and weakest IS province in the region, it also seems to be the province with the closest relations with the IS core. Whether or not Mumin is the leader of the global terrorist network or the GDP, it is clear that ISS has played a key role within the broader IS structure. The main indication of this is the commanding role allegedly occupied by al-Karrar over its other African affiliates: ISCAP and ASJ. A second indication of this is ISS's centrality in the funding of other IS-provinces, particularly ISKP which is deemed the most serious threat to Europe. So far, the offensive that was launched against the group in 2025 seems to have significantly hampered its financing capacity, although the group remains resilient. But whether or not the momentum will be durable remains to be seen.

The third indication is its rapid attraction of foreign fighters, particularly from the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa, for a time. Despite the ostensibly harsh conditions in the Cal Miskaad Mountains, this could suggest some external push factors, such as efforts by IS

²⁴⁴ UNSC, "Thirty-sixth report," p. 9.

²⁴⁵ Interview 8.

²⁴⁶ ICG, "The Islamic State in Somalia," p. 7.

²⁴⁷ ICG, "The Islamic State in Somalia"; Caleb Weiss, "US, UAE conducting airstrikes in northern Somalia," 5 February 2025, FDD's Long War Journal; Reuters, "Islamic State attacks military bases in Somalia's Puntland," 11 February 2025.

²⁴⁸ UNSC, "Thirty-seventh report," p. 10.

²⁴⁹ ICG, "The Islamic State in Somalia," p. 13; UNSC, "Thirty-fifth report," p. 9.

²⁵⁰ Interview 7; Interview 8.

²⁵¹ ICG, "The Islamic State in Somalia," p. 13.

Central to promote travel to join ISS.²⁵² Should the counter-insurgency campaign continue to sever ISS from its traditional revenue-generating streams and travel routes for foreign fighters, it is likely that the group will lose its relevance and be overtaken by other wilayat within the IS hierarchy. Nevertheless, that several Western states, including Sweden and the US, have arrested individuals suspected of aiding or planning to travel to Somalia to join the group points to ISS's efforts and ability to recruit from outside its immediate subregion. However, its ability to do so likely hinges on its broader status within the IS hierarchy.

²⁵² Warner, "Is the Islamic State's moving to Africa?"

5 Concluding discussion

As this report shows, Africa-based jihadist organisations continue to pose serious and dynamic threats to international security. Three broader conclusions are worth highlighting at the outset of this discussion. Firstly, not only do these groups now account for the largest share of jihadist attacks and related fatalities worldwide, most of them 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, as this report shows, the Africa-based jihadist organisations in the three theatres discussed remain dynamic, resilient and adaptable to changing security and geopolitical environments. Thirdly, even though these organisations largely adhere to global jihadist brands such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State, they are very much coloured by their own surrounding environments. Even so, the very adherence to such brands remains an important aspect in the doctrine and operations of the organisations discussed. These dynamics are apparent to varying degrees across all three areas studied in this report, and their organisational trajectories and operational profiles differ significantly. As such, the nature and scope of the threat that each of these groups poses to international and European security as well as European interests vary considerably. European interests is understood here as the potential spill-over effects on Europe as well as the protection of European nationals, of European organisations operating in the abovementioned countries, European investments and trade, and European states' relations with their African counterparts. The following sections discuss these similarities and differences, as well as the threat they pose to Europe and European interests. The groups within each geographic area are examined separately, before turning to a cross-regional comparison that identifies broader patterns and trends.

5.1 Case-specific conclusions

Since the beginning of the decade, ISWAP has become entrenched in the Lake Chad basin region, rationalised its bureaucracy and strengthened its governance system. At the same time, ISWAP has become an increasingly central actor within the IS architecture, including through the absorption of other wilayat and the ascension of its leaders within the IS hierarchy. Nevertheless, the group has demonstrated little ambition or ability to conduct attacks far outside its area of operations and control, and has struggled to expand outside the Lake Chad basin. As such, the group does not seem to pose a direct threat to European public safety in the immediate term. However, it continues to pose a serious threat to European organisations and nationals in Nigeria and the broader Lake Chad basin region. Although there is evidence of foreign elements among ISWAP's ranks, these do not make up a large share of its fighting capacity. Nevertheless, given that ISWAP and al-Furqan, as well as its leaders, have clearly climbed within the IS hierarchy, it is not implausible that a greater number of fighters may arrive, both to provide and to receive training. This is not to say that the Lake Chad basin will become a base from which IS may seek to intensify its holy war. Rather, it may be used as a hub for training fighters who may be redeployed elsewhere, potentially enhancing the capabilities of other IS affiliates. The January 2026 ISSP attack against Niamey's international airport could be an early sign of this. Although ISWAP clearly appears to be the most serious threat to the Lake Chad region today, its authority and influence in the area continue to be challenged by the Nigerian security forces, the presence of JAS factions, which have proven to be resilient in the face of an ostensibly much stronger adversary, as well as Ansaru and bandit gangs.

In Somalia, al-Shabaab clearly remains the most powerful non-state armed actor, and increasingly also a long-term governance actor. With its large membership and control of substantial swathes of land, together with its extensive influence network in Mogadishu and other cities, it clearly remains a long-term threat to security and stability in Somalia and beyond. Within Somalia, in particular, and in Sub-Saharan Africa more broadly, al-

Shabaab appears to be the most threatening actor for international security and strategic interests in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea region. This is partly due to Somalia's location, with a coastline on the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, where a large share of European and world trade transits. But it is also due to the increased cooperation between al-Shabaab and the Yemen-based Houthis and AQAP who are threatening international shipping and will likely continue doing so in the near term. The potential transfer of more sophisticated weapons and capabilities to al-Shabaab from the Houthis further underscores this threat. While ISS, today, appears critically weakened by the Puntland forces and their international partners, the group has never posed a very extensive kinetic threat to strategic and commercial interests. Rather, its strength has lain in its role as a financial and logistical hub between various IS provinces and the core, as well as its ability to generate and redistribute funds for IS operations elsewhere. Furthermore, the promotion of ISS leader Mumin within the IS hierarchy points to ISS's strategic value to the IS core and wider network. The extent to which this will remain so, or whether IS's centre of gravity will move to another part of the world, will likely be clarified and be an important factor to monitor over the coming year. What is clear is that ISS, despite its limited and degraded capabilities, remains resilient. And it has actively recruited sympathisers abroad. Compared to al-Shabaab, which is much bigger and better armed, there have been more indications of recent ISS recruiting abroad than al-Shabaab, meaning that even though ISS is smaller in Somalia it could currently pose a greater kinetic threat to Europe.

Finally, the situation in the Sahel remains extremely complicated due to the presence of a plethora of armed and violent actors, a situation made worse by the current geopolitical climate. JNIM clearly appears to be the most capable of the groups threatening regime stability in the subregion, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso, while also posing a serious problem for the coastal West African states. Although JNIM already governs extensive rural spaces in northern and central Mali and across Burkina Faso, it has struggled to seize and hold large urban areas. However, this may not even be necessary. The group exerts control in other ways and has resorted to blockades and targeted embargoes. This demonstrates its ability to strike the most sensitive pressure points of the authorities in place, particularly in Mali, while, simultaneously, avoiding taking too much territory, which would allow it to remain more flexible. As such, JNIM is imposing more of a hybrid governance system, in addition to the formal one provided by the state, akin to the one imposed by al-Shabaab in southern and central Somalia.

In addition, the increased targeting of state security forces and their allies, as well as JNIM's campaign to win hearts and minds, point to an emerging ambition to become an alternative to the state. It has been suggested that JNIM is, indeed, mimicking some of the moves made by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria. However, various analysts have dismissed JNIM's ability to take over Bamako by force as well as its ability to govern should the military junta collapse. Transitioning from the al-Qaeda brand may also have its own costs and may lead some of its fighters to defect to other groups such as ISSP. Beyond Mali and Burkina Faso, it is clear that JNIM is looking to expand its area of operations westward towards Senegal and eastward towards Nigeria. The drivers for this are likely twofold: increased access to funding streams and countering the threat from ISSP. However, this expansion also comes with a series of risks relating to group cohesion and command and control. Despite JNIM's extensive territorial presence and despite its adherence to the al-Qaeda brand, there is little to suggest it is willing or able to launch attacks in other parts of the world, including in Europe. As such, it is probable that the group will remain focused on the subregion in the medium term but with continued destabilising effects.

ISSP's challenge to JNIM is certain to continue in the medium term. Although ISSP, just like JNIM, will likely remain inherently driven by local and regional dynamics, increased indications of cooperation between ISWAP and ISSP underscore a worrisome trend, particularly against the backdrop of ISSP's entrenched presence in the tri-border area and ISWAP's growing importance within the IS architecture. The Niamey airport attack in early 2026 seems to further cement this concern. Moreover, the anecdotal reports of ISSP

sympathisers being arrested in Morocco and directed from the Sahel could point to a latent threat beyond the group's key area of operations. Consequently, although most of its fighters are recruited locally, attacks by "lone wolves" or small cells operating abroad cannot be entirely discounted in the medium term.

5.2 Cross-regional comparison

What the groups from all three areas studied have in common is that they appear to succeed within broadly destabilised security and political environments. Such environments are characterised by absent or weak state control, fragile security dynamics, poor governance mechanisms, and huge humanitarian and development needs. In addition, these groups have shown an ability to adapt to both local and broader geopolitical changes, as well as thinking tactically and strategically, which confirms that the threat they pose has a certain degree of longevity.

Differences, and, in some cases, similarities, between the groups included in the study become evident when looking more closely at several key aspects of their activity: fighting capacity; areas of operations and/or control; capabilities and modus operandi; ability to govern or superimpose governance structures; ability or willingness to strike out-of-area targets; the presence and potential influence of foreign fighters; and the relationship with the al-Qaeda or IS-core organisations.²⁵³

Firstly, the fighting capacity of each of these groups varies greatly. While the estimated numbers of fighters have grown in most of these groups, in some cases nearly doubling, in others they have fallen. Secondly, the groups' areas of operation and/or control vary greatly in size. For instance, JNIM operates across an area larger than Ukraine, while ISWAP, which is much larger in terms of estimated numbers of fighters, covers an area comparable in size to Belgium. Thirdly, in terms of capabilities and modus operandi, these factors obviously present many differences between the groups. The capabilities of smaller groups such as Ansaru, JAS, and ISS appear to have stalled or declined, likely due to their weakening in recent years. The first two have been assailed by rival pressure and internal fragmentation, while the latter has primarily been constrained by local and US offensives. Conversely, al-Shabaab, ISWAP, JNIM, and ISSP all appear to have strengthened their kinetic capabilities, using increasingly sophisticated tactics such as drones and IEDs and demonstrating a capability to launch complex assaults against military targets.

Fourthly, these groups are able to govern or superimpose governance structures within the areas they operate to varying degrees. The most organised structures appear to be among the largest groups such as al-Shabaab and ISWAP, which also demonstrate the clearest efforts to provide alternative governance to national or local authorities. However, groups of similar size also have ostensible differences in capability. This is evident when comparing ISSP's establishment of governance structures to those of JAS, both with a similar number of fighters but with varying ways of superimposing their governance models in their area of operations. Counterintuitively, relating to these groups' ability and willingness to strike out-of-area targets, it appears that it is the smaller groups with weaker capabilities that have a willingness to strike targets outside of their area of operations. Anecdotal reports have indicated that both ISSP and ISS have had a willingness to do this. Admittedly, al-Shabaab has repeatedly struck high-profile targets in Nairobi, but has not carried out attacks outside of Africa. Neither ISWAP nor JNIM have conducted attacks outside their areas of operations.

A fifth point is that having the ability or the willingness to recruit foreign fighters is the exception among the groups rather than the rule. One exception is ISS. Al-Shabaab did attract foreign fighters early on in its insurgency, but, since a purge in the early 2010s, the

²⁵³ Ability or willingness to strike out-of-area targets refer to that is targets that are located outside of this group's immediate subregion.

bulk of its fighters have been Somali.²⁵⁴ This is not to say that they do not receive outside help at all or that this dynamic will remain unchanged over time. It may simply mean that fighting jihad in Africa is currently less attractive, or that these groups are expending less effort recruiting from abroad than they used to.

Lastly, each organisation's relationship with their core jihadist brands also varies but there are also some commonalities. Overall, for most of the groups examined, their relevance to the core organisation appears to have increased over the past five years, a development that mirrors the broader trend noted in the introduction of African groups assuming a more central role in the global jihadist movement. Both ISWAP and ISS appear to have strong links with the IS core. ISSP's links with the IS core appear less evident, although they are plausibly stronger thanks to its increasingly close links to ISWAP. The acquiring of capabilities to make IEDs to a greater degree and launching increasingly complex assaults may indeed stem from interactions with outside trainers and assistance. By the same token, both al-Shabaab and JNIM appear to have strong links to the al-Qaeda core, although there has been speculation about JNIM's potential plans to drop the al-Qaeda brand. As hinted above, extricating oneself from that brand will inevitably come with costs. The coming one to two years will likely clarify this development. Ansaru's and JAS's links with their jihadist cores are less clear and likely very weak.

This study is but one small contribution to a much broader body of research and analysis that seeks to improve the understanding of the functioning and evolution of jihadist groups. While it is clear that the jihadist violence is shifting to Sub-Saharan Africa to a greater degree, it is far from certain that the region will become a jihadist safe haven any time soon. As this study shows, a key driver for the formation of these jihadist organisations is local grievances. However, continued monitoring and analysis is critical in order to better understand how these problems may evolve over the coming five years. Such studies need to be conducted over longer periods of time, but also be more targeted and in-depth, rather than ad hoc. They could include examples such as case studies and comparative analyses of threat actors; comparisons of different actors' adoption or use of specific capabilities, such as the use of UAVs, disinformation or artificial intelligence; or mapping exercises to understand jihadist groups' movement patterns in relation to specific events. Given the remoteness and volatility of the regions most affected by jihadist violence, more resources could be devoted to satellite imagery analysis, and open-source intelligence analysis.

²⁵⁴ Center för våldsbejakande extremism, "Våldsbejakande extremism i Somalia," November 2022; Samantha Kruber and Stephanie Carver, "Insurgency Group Cohesion and the Malleability of 'Foreigners': Al-Shabaab's Relationship with Foreign Fighters," 2023, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 46, no. 10, pp. 1894–1911.

Annex 1: Interview key

Interview 1	Lake Chad basin expert 1	Conflict researcher	Online	October 2025
Interview 2	Sahel expert 1	Analyst & consultant	Online	October 2025
Interview 3	Sahel expert 2	Academic	Online	November 2025
Interview 4	Sahel expert 3	Journalist	Paris	November 2025
Interview 5	Lake Chad basin expert 2	Academic	Paris	October 2025
Interview 6	Lake Chad basin expert 3	Conflict researcher	Paris	November 2025
Interview 7	Somalia expert 1	Conflict researcher	Online	October 2025
Interview 8	Somalia expert 2	Analyst	Online	November 2025
Interview 9	Lake Chad basin expert 4	Analyst	Online	November 2025

Annex 2: Analytical matrix of case studies

	Fighting capacity		Area of operations and/or control	Capabilities and modus operandi	Ability to govern/superimpose governance structures	Ability to attack the capital	Ability/willingness to strike out-of-area targets*	Relationship with the al-Qaeda/IS core and affiliates.	Foreign fighters
Analytical questions	What is the estimated fighting capacity of this group?	Has it increased or decreased since 2020?	Has this group lost, maintained, entrenched itself, or expanded its area of operations?			Does this group have the ability to attack the capital in the country where it operates?		How is the relationship with the core?	Does this organisation recruit foreign fighters?
ISWAP	8k–12k	Marked increase.	Has remained entrenched in the Lake Chad basin. Has taken over JAS stronghold in Sambisa, but has not established a durable presence outside of Borno.	Capabilities have strengthened, including use of night-vision technology, weaponised drones and complex assaults on Nigerian military camps.	Has ability and ambition to govern and superimpose governance structures. Organisation is increasingly rationalised. Collects zakat and exacts punishments.	Yes, but likely limited ambition at the moment. Has targeted areas in close proximity to the capital, but not struck high-profile targets within the city.	Not yet. However, ISWAP is conducting more attacks outside the Lake Chad basin. It also appears to have sent fighters to support ISSP in attack on Niamey.	Increasingly strong: al-Furqan has absorbed other regional offices. ISWAP leaders form part of Islamic State's leadership. ISWAP claims many attacks through central IS propagand channels.	Yes, but limited numbers.
JAS	2k–3k	Marginal overall increase.	Has factionalised in the Lake Chad basin, with two–three bases. A fourth faction remains entrenched in north-central Nigeria.	Capabilities largely unchanged. Modus operandi veering increasingly towards banditism but preaching still an element.	To a very limited extent in the areas it controls.	No.	No.	Ostensibly very weak but not in-existent.	Unlikely.
Ansaru	Unknown.	Unclear.	Unclear structure and territorial presence.	Very limited.	Has superimposed limited governance in some local areas.	No.	No, but its ideology is historically directed towards US and other foreign interests.	Strong relationship with JNIM and AQIM. Unclear relationship with al-Qaeda core.	Unlikely.

JNIM	5k-6k	Increased.	Has significantly expanded its areas of operations and control.	Kinetic capabilities have strengthened. Modus operandi are evolving with blockades, K&R, "protection of civilians," and other means.	Has an ability to control remote, rural areas and superimpose governance structures such as blockades on major cities and transport routes.	Yes. Has attacked all three Sahelian capitals, but no high-impact attacks in Niamey.	Probably not. But is operating across a vast area, from northern Mali to northwestern Nigeria.	Relationship with AQ core appears strong, but there are signs of friction.	Yes, but restricted to the subregion.
ISSP	2k - 3k	Significantly increased.	Remains entrenched in the Liptako-Gourma area and has expanded to southwestern Niger and northwestern Nigeria.	Capabilities have been boosted, including with the use of IEDs, drones, and complex attacks against military bases.	Has ability and willingness to control remote, rural areas.	Yes. Targeted Niamey in January 2026.	Likely. Arrests of ISSP cells and sympathisers in Morocco demonstrate potential for ISSP-orchestrated or -inspired attacks elsewhere.	Relationship with IS core appears strong based on indirect links via ISWAP. Cooperation between ISSP and ISWAP appears stronger.	Mostly recruits fighters from within the subregion but anecdotal evidence points to out-of-area recruitment.
Al-Shabaab	10k-18k	Significantly increased.	Continues to control parts of central and southern Somalia; continues to contest FGS in Mogadishu and elsewhere.	Capabilities remain strong and largely unchanged. Recruitment has boosted its ranks and fighting capacity.	Has ability to control rural areas, and superimpose governance structures in major cities such as Mogadishu.	Yes. Has repeatedly demonstrated an ability and willingness to strike Somali and foreign forces and interests in Mogadishu.	Yes, although primarily in Kenya and Ethiopia.	Relationship with Al-Qaeda core appears strong, including propaganda material using al-Qaeda symbols. Senior leaders form part of al-Qaeda leadership structure.	Very limited.
ISS	200-300	Significantly decreased.	Has been significantly weakened but remains resilient in its stronghold in Puntland.	Kinetic capabilities: historically limited but momentarily strengthened in the 2020-25 period. Capabilities to collect funds: very strong.	Likely controls remote areas in the Cal Miskaad Mountains. Has shown an ability to superimpose limited governance structures in towns in Puntland and in Mogadishu.	No.	Yes. Has been able to recruit fighters from abroad, both to join its fight locally and to conduct attacks abroad.	Ostensibly a very close relationship with the IS core. Could weaken due to attrition and unrest in Mid-East.	Extensive recruitment of foreign fighters between 2020 and 2025. Anecdotal evidence of out-of-area recruitment.

* The author defines "Out-of-area operations" in this context as attacks occurring outside the organisation's immediate subregion.

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