

# It's a Bit Tricky: Exploring ISIS's Ties with Boko Haram

By Bulama Bukarti || March 7, 2022



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On 18 January 2022, the Islamic State (ISIS) released a 27-minute [video](#) titled "the empowered generation" from its West Africa Province (ISWAP), which showcased the group's daily routine of religious indoctrination of children and highlighting its military training. The film is a graduation ceremony for the first set of its "cubs of the caliphate", who are trained "to love martyrdom and slaughtering in the path of Allah". Its third and final segment was the most ruthless. It showed three children separately executing three captive soldiers. The first executioner—who appeared as young as 10-years-old—cried, "O enemies of Allah! Do you think that the killing of my father and brother will make us stop?", in Arabic language. The child then puts his rifle to the head of a man in Nigerian army uniform kneeling tied up before him, and pulls the trigger. With this clip, ISWAP provided a window into its "transgenerational indoctrination programme", which took years to put together.

The production—which is ISWAP's first in 2022 and probably its most sophisticated, staged with drone shots and close-ups—is infused with marks of ISWAP's ties to ISIS. Shot against the background of ISIS's black-and-white flag, the first speaker opens with a reference to northeast Nigeria where the video was taped as ISIS's territory. Midway through the video, the children are shown raptly watching ISIS's documentary of the battle for the eastern [Syrian city of Hajin](#)— the last major town controlled by ISIS that was recaptured in December 2018. It concludes with a rather dramatic display, in which the two dozen children present form a narrow circle around their instructor, clasp their right hands, and proclaim in chorus, "I give my allegiance to the Commander of the Faithful and Caliph of the Muslims, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurashi, to hear and obey [him] in times of difficulty and comfort, in hardship and ease..." This is their oath of initiation.

Thus did these 24 children swear on their lives to join thousands of others and serve as foot soldiers for a supposed leader in hiding over 5,000 miles away, who [was killed](#) in an American raid two weeks after the video was released. None of them had ever seen the [now-deceased former caliph](#), but that does not take anything away from their passion to give their lives for his cause. For these children poisoned with a warped ideology, geography, race, or language, are inconsequential. Theirs is the

latest display of a union that was formed six years ago. When ISWAP pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2015, the extent of the ties between the two became a hotly-debated issue among scholars, analysts and governments. Some dismiss it as mere propaganda; some portray ISWAP and other affiliates as “[Islamic State cells across Africa](#)” or “[The Islamic State Franchises in Africa](#)”; and others suggest that ISWAP is completely different from its parent group Boko Haram, claiming that the former is really a “[Band of International Criminal Gangs](#)”.

By dissecting the history, nature, and depth of ISWAP ties to ISIS, this report argues that the truth lies in the middle between those two extremes. It submits that the relationship is neither empty propaganda nor is it deep enough to reduce ISWAP to a mere puppet. The duo are, rather, partners in an [adhocratic arrangement](#). The essay discusses ISIS’s influence on ISWAP’s leadership, policy, and administration, and concludes that ISIS played a significant role in shaping ISWAP and, most importantly, keeping it from disintegrating. The essay draws on original materials—including internal communiques—of Boko Haram in Hausa, Kanuri and Arabic, recent literature based on extensive interviews with defectors, as well as recent reporting that potentially provides a window into the internal dynamics of the ISIS-ISWAP ‘unholy’ alliance.

### ISWAP’s Origins, 2003-2015

Boko Haram, which later became ISWAP and other factions, was [formed](#) in 2003 by a collection of local Islamic preachers and activists in northeast Nigeria who were inspired by al-Qaeda and the Taliban. They sought to establish a group that would violently pursue the establishment of a puritanical Islamic state in northern Nigeria. After years of aggressive grassroots recruitment and radicalization, Boko Haram turned violent in 2009 and has since killed an estimated [35,000 people](#), plunging another 10 million—including the three million that its operations have [displaced](#)—into a complex humanitarian crisis that has killed [340,000](#) people, of which 90% are young children. Today, Boko Haram’s factions—*Jama’atu Ahl al-Sunnah li al Da’wati wa al-Jihad* (JAS), which is independent, *Ansaru al Musulmina fi Bidad al-Sudan* (Ansaru), which is affiliated to al-Qaeda, and ISWAP, which is affiliated to ISIS—[continue](#) to devastate parts of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad despite efforts by national and regional security forces supported by Western partners, including the U.S. and the European Union.

There are [unsupported claims](#) that Boko Haram’s transnational links date back to its inception, but the evidence shows that tenable ties were formed around 2010, seven years after its formation, when it reached out to al-Qaeda for help in the wake of its defeat at the hands of Nigerian security forces in July 2009. Boko Haram’s Abubakar Shekau, who took over after the death of its first leader Muhammad Yusuf, [pledged allegiance](#) to al-Qaeda and received NGN 50,000,000 (about USD 77,000 based on the exchange rate at the time) and weapons. Boko Haram began launching guerrilla-style attacks that targeted security personnel, politicians, and traditional rulers who played a role in facilitating their 2009 defeat. As the group officially named itself JAS and morphed into an insurgent group, its violence grew more indiscriminate, including its attacks on Muslim civilians. JAS’s sheer brutality ruptured Shekau’s relationship with al-Qaeda, culminating in the splinter of JAS and al-Qaeda loyalists who formed the offshoot Ansaru.

Under Shekau, JAS continued to grow independent of al-Qaeda and Ansaru by escalating attacks across Nigeria and expanding to parts of Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria. By 2014, it had captured Nigerian territory equal to the size of Belgium and proclaimed an Islamic state. In 2015, Shekau pledged allegiance (*bay'a*) to ISIS's now-deceased caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. His pledge was [accepted](#) within five days. Consequently, JAS rebranded as Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Shekau became its first *wali* or governor, heralding a new chapter in JAS's history. Today, ISIS continues to shape ISWAP in important ways even as the latter remains largely localised in its messaging, agenda, and enemies.



*Image 1: Abubakar Shekau, flanked by Boko Haram militants, issues a speech to the group's followers.*

### Shekau's *Bay'a* not an "Auction"

Shekau's allegiance to ISIS came at a time when the Nigerian security forces and their regional and international allies had escalated operations against JAS, eventually dislodging it from the territory it occupied to the fringes of Lake Chad. This led some scholars and analysts to see the move as the last kicks of a dying beast. At an international conference in which the author participated in Abuja in March 2015—the month of Shekau's *bay'a*—Professor Tijjani El-Miskin, a respected professor from Maiduguri where Boko Haram was formed, argued with vehemence that the step was a “cheap auction” by a group on the edge of a cliff.

Other commentators dismissed it as a “[mere propaganda posing no security threat](#)”, or as “[more of a cry for help](#)”. Over a year after the *bay'a*, some American security and intelligence officials were still describing it “[primarily as a rebranding exercise](#)” even when U.S. troops on the ground were ringing alarm bells over “[one of \[the\] concrete examples of a direct link](#)”.

But evidence that would later come to light shows that these dismissive comments could not have been more wrong, as JAS's move was first and foremost a product of ideological, rather than practical, considerations. Shekau did not pledge allegiance to ISIS because JAS was weak and desperately wanted to save face. In fact, he did so under [serious pressure](#) from his lieutenants. When al-Baghdadi proclaimed the establishment of the Islamic State in June 2014, top JAS leaders saw it as their religious duty to follow him as the supreme leader of Muslims. Citing such Islamic scriptural authorities, including the Prophet Muhammad's statement that “Whoever dies when he had not pledged allegiance to an imam (caliph) dies a death of ignorance (*jahiliyya*)”, the majority of JAS's *shura* members—including its second in command Mamman Nur and founding leader Muhammad Yusuf's son, Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi—piled pressure on Shekau to give allegiance to ISIS.

Shekau argued that he had no religious duty to follow al-Baghdadi, stating that Islam permits them to maintain their separate caliphate and cited their bad experience with al-Qaeda as reasons for his hesitation. Given Shekau's megalomania, it is possible that his resistance was partly out of fear that his authority as the overall leader of JAS (imam) who commanded absolute loyalty from its members would diminish under ISIS. After long and heated debates, Shekau required assurances from ISIS as a condition for his loyalty. Following [exchanges of messages](#) in which ISIS approved of Shekau's ideology and accepted him as the potential *wali* of ISWAP, he reluctantly agreed. In fact, talks about the alliance began when JAS was at its peak. The group's abduction of 276 schoolgirls in April 2014 (over 100 of whom are still in the group's custody) was the event that catapulted it to international attention. In the days and weeks that followed the kidnapping, Shekau exploited the opportunity to make headlines by threatening on camera "[to sell](#)" the girls, forcefully converted them, and more.

One person piqued by this incident was Abu Malik Shayba al-Hamad, the head of ISIS's Africa Media outlet. Al-Hamad claims to have facilitated JAS's *bay'a* to ISIS, and chronicles how he midwived the JAS-ISIS union in a [document](#) he published on 27 March 2015 on his Twitter account (which is now suspended). Al-Hamad explained that it was the abduction of the Chibok girls that changed his negative views of JAS to admiration for the group. After watching their videos, he successfully contacted a member of JAS's communication team through a number he found on a thread (likely on Twitter). When al-Hamad mooted to him the idea of giving *bay'a* to ISIS, the member explained that JAS militants had been wanting to do so, but there were delays due to "some doubts" that they were working to resolve. This is most likely a reference to Shekau's unwillingness to pledge allegiance at first. As the doubts were resolved through clarification and assurances from ISIS, Shekau announced his allegiance and that of his group. From this account, it was in fact ISIS that courted JAS because of the latter's new global traction.

### **ISWAP are not a Puppet of ISIS**

While [analysts](#) and U.S. [officials](#) were doubting the ISIS-JAS tie, the Nigerian government was inflating it, with then President Jonathan [claiming](#) that JAS fighters had trained in ISIS camps in the Middle East. Similar narratives have continued under the current Buhari administration. In its frantic bid to push its narrative that JAS has been defeated, then Chief of Army Staff of the Nigerian army [asserted](#) that JAS (or Boko Haram) and ISWAP are two completely different groups, and that it was after the former had been defeated that "International Criminal Gangs" under ISWAP emerged to exploit the vulnerabilities that were created. Western media ran with [headlines](#) and commentaries suggesting JAS had been subsumed, while other analysts portrayed ISWAP as an ISIS "cell" or "franchise". These, in the author's view, exaggerate the relationship between the two.

The debate as to the nature and extent of ISIS's ties with groups in Africa is not just limited to the Lake Chad context. Following the development of ties between the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), [doubts and debates](#) on the veracity and depth of the ties between the two arose. In a June 2020 report, the UN Group of Experts on the DRC reported that it "[did not find any direct links](#)" between ADF and ISIS. A year later, the group reported that it did not



find evidence of “[direct support or command and control](#)” with ISIS over ADF, even as it noted other evidence of ties such as communication, as well as shifts in ADF’s objectives and attacks strategy to align with that of ISIS.

But as the ISIS-ISWAP case study demonstrates, “direct command and control” is probably the wrong connection to look for. ISIS has never claimed to have acquired direct operational control over ISWAP or of any of its provinces in Africa, and this is not its *modus operandi* in relation to African groups. The relationship instead is an “adhocratic” arrangement by which affiliates remain a localised group with a local agenda, which in turn feeds into ISIS’s global agenda. ISWAP continues to be independent in its day-to-day administration and operations, while ISIS gives it broad guidelines in the form of advice and input on ISWAP’s top-level decision-making. At the same time, ISIS has supported ISWAP financially and operationally, and shaped its leadership and policy.

### **ISIS’s Influence on ISWAP’s Leadership**

The first thing ISIS ensured in the wake of ISWAP’s *bay’a* was setting up direct lines of communication via multiple Telegram groups. They used these to communicate virtually in real time about policy, strategy, and administration, giving ISIS an opportunity to feed into each. ISWAP has seen three major leadership crises since its association with ISIS, with the latter playing a significant role through each crisis. The first of ISWAP’s schisms reached a turning point in 2016 when several top members of the ISWAP shura led by Nur— one of Boko Haram’s founders and a contender for leadership in 2009 which Shekau won— and al-Barnawi accused Shekau of too extreme and ignorant interpretation of Islam, unjustifiable violence against Muslim civilians and misappropriation of ISWAP loots and rebelled against him. In the wake of this, ISIS arbitrated between Shekau and his rivals, including through exchange of letters. This culminated in a [conference call](#) between al-Baghdadi, Shekau and al-Barnawi. When ISIS threw its weight behind Nur/al-Barnawi’s smaller, rival faction, they quickly grew in strength and shortly surpassed Shekau’s JAS, partly due to mass defections from JAS as ISIS’s recognition of the rebels boosted their credentials and legitimacy in the eyes of commanders and foot soldiers. The second crisis fell in 2018 when Nur was accused of sabotaging ISWAP — after failing in his ISWAP leadership bid — and attempting to defect by handing himself to Nigerian authorities. ISWAP preferred to either exile him or put him under house arrest because it believed executing Nur would be divisive, owing to his status in the group. But al-Baghdadi [ruled](#) that he should be killed. ISWAP leaders were not receptive to this verdict, but still implemented it because they saw ISIS’s decisions as binding.

In March 2019, Ba Idrissa (known as Idris al-Barnawi) became ISWAP’s new *wali*, while Abu Mus’ab al-Barnawi was demoted to a member of the *shura*. Neither ISWAP nor ISIS explained the reasons for this change, but Abu Mus’ab reportedly accepted the decision and assumed his new role. Then came unverified reports of another leadership crisis in ISWAP, one that reportedly led to the killing or detention of Ba Idrissa and the formation of a new leadership structure under Lawan Shayima. As a result, ISIS dissolved the new executive in 2021 and brought back Abu Mus’ab al-Barnawi as interim leader to carry out detailed reforms directed by ISIS. Al-Barnawi [explained](#) that ISIS was angered by

past failures to follow its guidance, and had given him detailed reforms in the administration of the caliphate, including justice and prison reforms, and policy relating to war spoils. By sending detailed reforms, re-appointing al-Barnawi, and ordering Shekau dead (see below), ISIS sought to make ISWAP more effective, strengthen its grip over them, and eliminate its key militant rival. These reforms were disrupted by al-Barnawi's reported death during a battle with Shekau's militants, but the fact that ISWAP commanders did not object to al-Barnawi's return, as well as the latter's eagerness to implement ISIS's guidance, is clear testimony to ISIS's influence on ISWAP leadership.

Shekau's death is another example of ISIS's power over ISWAP. JAS and ISWAP have been embroiled in deadly infighting since their split. However, ISWAP did not seek Shekau's death until they received "[direct orders](#)" to that effect from ISIS in April/May 2021. Once the direction came, ISWAP's foot soldiers killed Shekau within weeks. But even when Shekau [was breathing his last breath](#), he did not dissociate himself from ISIS, instead maintaining that he was the true leader recognized by ISIS and that both of the now-deceased caliphs al-Baghdadi and al-Hashimi were only misled by Shekau's detractors. Given ISWAP's constant state of leadership crisis—which started long before ISIS came into the picture—it is likely that ISIS's intervention as an arbitrator played a significant role in keeping ISWAP together after Shekau was deposed. Without an "outside" arbiter who is respected by all leaders, commanders and members, ISWAP might have broken into pieces. The key reform in ISIS's recent guidelines, [according al-Barnawi](#), was breaking ISWAP into four districts under four different *walis* reporting to one leader. This is apparently intended to ensure better efficiency and administrative convenience, but may also have been designed to resolve ISWAP's leadership tussle by giving major commanders some territorial control.

### ISIS's Influence on ISWAP's Policy and Operations

Using the Telegram channels set up to make calls and exchange photos, audio, video and text messages, ISIS provided guidance on theology, operations, and administration, which were highlighted in an insightful [report](#) by the International Crisis Group. These included *fatwas* (jurisprudential rulings) on both spiritual matters such as fasting and *zakat* (charity), as well as personal law issues such as marriage. ISWAP needed these rulings because it lacks in-house clerics versed in Islamic theology. In terms of strategy, ISIS was involved in developing a daily schedule of religious indoctrination, military training, and physical exercise for ISWAP recruits. Perhaps most importantly, ISIS helped ISWAP to change its



*Image 2: Zenam Kelouri, Nigeria: Nigerian soldiers demonstrate their fight against Boko Haram. Photo: VOA/Nicolas Pinault*

policy of mobilizing soldiers to fight when called upon by founding a standing army housed in barracks. Telegram was also used to instruct ISWAP on how to operate drones and manufacture ammunitions.

Remote training was then accompanied by the [deployment of trainers](#) from Libya, who spent months in the Lake Chad region building ISWAP's tactical and operational capacity. The trainers went out on battles alongside ISWAP foot soldiers, observing them and tutoring them. They recommended a routine of physical and religious education, changes in ISWAP battle tactics, and the creation of a military police brigade to monitor and interdict defectors, and eventually taught ISWAP anti-aircraft and infantry techniques, among others. Hundreds of ISWAP fighters were also deployed to Libya for training. In 2021, a [report](#) emerged claiming that 300 ISWAP fighters who had trained for months in Libya had now returned to the Lake Chad region.

At the same time, ISIS gave ISWAP substantial financial assistance through regular disbursement of monies ranging from [USD 10,000 to 100,000](#). These payments likely came through transfers to ISWAP agents in Nigeria via the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as evidenced by a UAE [court judgment](#) in which six Nigerians were convicted for terror financing in 2019. The Nigerians, who were bureau de change operators based in the UAE, were arrested in 2017 for transferring a total of USD 782,000.00 to two ISWAP agents in Nigeria. Court documents show that an Arab man who flew to the UAE from Turkey on different occasions handed the six men the amounts in cash, and then instructed their Nigerian associates operating at the bureau de change to pay equivalent sums to ISWAP undercover agents in Nigeria. These transactions took place since 2015— the year ISWAP's relationship with ISIS started.

Since its 2016 splinter from Shekau, ISWAP stayed true to its criticism of the JAS leader by pursuing a [civilian-friendly](#) policy, one that largely spared Muslim residents while Shekau's JAS launched incriminate attacks including horrific assaults on civilians that triggered public outrages. This marked divergence in attack modus operandi—in addition to Shekau's frequently provocative propaganda appearances and global infamy, which contrast sharply with ISWAP's tactic of keeping a low profile— led to the assumption that JAS was a bigger challenge. As the Nigerian military [focused on JAS's](#) areas, ISWAP used the breathing space to build its capacity with the support of ISIS. Starting in 2017, ISWAP started targeting smaller military formations, looting weapons and supplies and gaining combat experience. In 2018, it began to assault larger military camps of 700–1000 soldiers, [successfully overrunning many of them](#). This contributed to “[a notable drop in civilian casualties](#)” and a rise in military casualties, with over [750 security forces fatalities](#) in 2019 alone. Shekau's death and the [incorporation](#) of many of his fighters into ISWAP has allowed the group to consolidate its position with an estimated [4,000 to 5,000](#) fighters and step-up in attacks on states forces not just in Nigeria, but also [in Cameroon](#).

While the reduction in civilian casualties is good news in the short-term, it could be extremely dangerous in the medium- and long-term as ISWAP continues to pursue its “[hearts and minds](#)” approach. In addition to actively protecting civilians from JAS's predatory raids in exchange for paying taxes and obeying its rules, ISWAP is also engaged in distributing [food, clothes and money](#), while deliberately [targeting aid workers](#) in what appears to be a calculated move to monopolise charity. At the same time, the group undertakes preaching tours to villages and on highway systems where it encourages people to migrate to its territory with promises of economic empowerment. These

narratives are bolstered by civilian perceptions of governments closing markets and banning fishing in an attempt to stifle ISWAP, which risks making communities more desperate and vulnerable to recruitment. With this strategy, ISWAP could win not only more fighters, but also sympathisers and informants to help the group consolidate its finance and supply routes and intelligence capabilities. ISWAP's [recent drone photograph](#) of a Nigerian army camp that it attacked indicates the group's increasing sophistication in using technology to gather intelligence, and makes the possibility of future drone strike capabilities a not-so-unthinkable proposition.

Despite ISIS's significant influence and substantial contributions, however, ISWAP was never reduced to merely an ISIS puppet. While ISIS orchestrates ISWAP's external-facing communications to global audiences, ISWAP maintains its local communications channels on Telegram, via newsletters and offline, sustaining its localized agenda. ISWAP has never changed its messaging to focus on ISIS's global enemies such as the West. Instead, its messaging remains very focused on its local enemies. Even for ISWAP's major decisions, ISIS's role in most cases has been one of giving advice and consent, which ISWAP followed in most cases. For example, it was reported that al-Baghdadi first sided with Shekau in the schism that splintered ISWAP in 2016 by asking his rivals to remain under him. It was only after they refused that ISIS backtracked and supported them, but Shekau's group did not cease to exist simply because ISIS had withdrawn its support from him.

In fact, there are instances in which ISWAP inspired ISIS's policy. In August 2020, ISIS explicitly declared humanitarian aid workers as a legitimate target, labelling them as "partners in combat even if their personnel do not carry weapons", and instructing its fighters to attack them. As the editorial of *al-Naba* magazine for 13 August shows, this proclamation was an endorsement of ISWAP's new practice of deliberate attacks on aid workers. The piece followed ISWAP's [video](#) in July 2020 in which the group executed four aid workers in cold blood and threatened to "continue to ambush and abduct" and kill them. ISIS not only defended ISWAP, but went on to make it policy for its provinces to adopt the same practice. ISIS itself has [killed](#) aid workers prior to 2020 as did its other affiliates like [the Islamic State Khorasan Province](#), but it was not until ISWAP embarked on its campaign that ISIS issued an explicit proclamation the following month. Just a month after ISIS's declaration of aid workers as legitimate target, its affiliate in central Sahel started to implement the movement's new edict by [murdering six French aid workers](#) and their local guides after capturing them.

## Conclusion

ISIS has shaped JAS and then ISWAP in fundamental ways and continues to do so today. From its communications and operations to its administration, ISWAP now bears the hallmarks of ISIS in important ways. Not only has ISIS enhanced ISWAP's effectiveness through remote and in-person training and financial support, but it is also likely that ISIS's intervention kept ISWAP from completely disintegrating into smaller factions comprising fighters in the low hundreds. In the midst of internal schisms, ISWAP leaders turned to ISIS for arbitration, and they have largely complied with ISIS



guidance even when it did not favor them. However, ISIS's support to ISWAP is not existential in the sense that event without it, ISWAP would not have vanished or rendered incapacitated. This is clear from the fact that the group that became ISWAP predated ISIS. If the reported death of al-Barnawi towards the end of 2021 turned out to be true—perhaps the most zealous ISIS loyalist among ISWAP leaders—ISIS's plans would have been impeded. However, this is not likely to be a long-term rupture, nor will it fundamentally affect ISIS's influence on ISWAP as communications between the groups continues unabated.

Having enjoyed relative success with its first affiliate in Africa, ISIS appears poised to roll out the ISWAP model across the continent, including in Mozambique and the DRC. Groups with expansive local roots are co-opted and enhanced in a way that achieves ISIS's global objectives but maintains the affiliates' independence, local relevance, and embeddedness. In these ways, ISIS has become a sort of a "[gig terrorism platform](#)" hosting groups with different—even contradictory—modes of operation. Inflating or downplaying these dynamics will not help matters. The best policy approach must address the affiliates' localized nature and agenda, while at the same time acknowledging and focusing on their transnational facilitators. Thus, the U.S. and other western countries and organizations' designation or listing of these groups as global terrorists, and as ISIS affiliates, should be prioritized. At the same time, such designations do not and should not in any way diminish the localized nature of the challenge.

One important takeaway for counterterrorism efforts is that direct information on ISIS's substantive support to ISWAP only began to be uncovered starting in 2020, five years after their relationship first formed. This is due in part to the fact that both ISIS and its affiliates across Africa are secretive groups that have mastered the art of clandestine operations: use of encrypted messaging platforms, circumventing the conventional banking system, and employing undercover agents. Thus, efforts to establish "direct evidence" of tangible links between ISIS and its affiliates are likely years behind the curve, which has serious implications regarding the recent dynamics surrounding the ADF and in similar cases. From these and other ongoing situations in the Lake Chad region, it may be accurate to assume that researchers and policymakers experience a three- to five-year lag when it comes to the internal dynamics of jihadi groups in Africa. Experts and policymakers need to engage in more inductive research and analysis techniques to generate possible models that start from assuming the worst rather than hoping for the best.