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Violent Islamist Groups in Northern Nigeria

By Madeline Velturo, Policy Analyst

Overview

Violent Islamist groups based in northern Nigeria remain some of the [*deadliest and most formidable*](#) jihadist groups operating in the world today. Estimates suggest that conflict with these groups has [*killed more than 37,500 people*](#) since 2011. A decade-long [*preliminary investigation*](#) by the International Criminal Court (ICC) found reasonable basis to believe that these militant Islamist groups have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Following several setbacks in 2016 and 2017, violent Islamist groups in northern Nigeria have made a resurgence in recent years. In the context of [*growing militant Islamist violence*](#) in several regions of West Africa, the following factsheet explores the current array of organized violent Islamist groups operating in northern Nigeria and throughout the broader Lake Chad Basin, the religious freedom violations they have committed in the past year, and the state of counterterrorism efforts in the region.

Boko Haram

Boko Haram¹ emerged as a Salafi jihadist movement in northeast Nigeria in 2002 under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf. After several years attempting to pursue its jihadist aims through peaceful means, Boko Haram evolved into a violent insurgency in 2009. Upon Yusuf's death that year, Abubakar Shekau assumed leadership of the movement.

Under Shekau's leadership, Boko Haram—sometimes referred to as “Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa al-Jihad,” or JAS—gained notoriety as one of the deadliest and most gruesome jihadist insurgencies in the world. The group's [*abduction of 276 school girls*](#) in Chibok in 2014 triggered an international outcry and an escalation of military efforts to neutralize the movement. Despite several defections by key leaders and the emergence of competing Salafi jihadist groups in the area, Shekau continues to command a core fighting force of roughly 2,500 fighters and control territory in northeast Nigeria and parts of Niger state. Boko Haram has also claimed responsibility for attacks in [*Niger, Chad, and Cameroon*](#).

¹ Boko Haram is commonly translated to mean “Western-education is forbidden” in English. However, several scholars reject this interpretation, which hinges on the word “boko” being a local corruption of the English word book, and instead interpret “boko” as an indigenous Hausa word meaning “fraud,” “sham,” or “inauthenticity.”

Boko Haram has committed several egregious violations of religious freedom in its areas of operation during the past year. In January 2020, Boko Haram fighters abducted Rev. Lawan Andimi, local chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in Adamawa state, and later beheaded him, reportedly because [he would not renounce his faith](#) and because his ransom was not paid. In February 2020, Boko Haram militants attacked Garkida, a town known for the foundation of the Church of the Brethren in the country, [burning at least five churches](#). In northern Cameroon, Boko Haram insurgents [attacked community leaders during a prayer service](#) in a mosque in retaliation because those leaders used the Qur'an to encourage villagers not to support jihadist groups.

Shekau also frequently has demonstrated significant intent to enforce his interpretation of Islam on others and target individuals based on their dissenting beliefs. In the aftermath of a Kano Shari'a court sentencing 22-year-old Islamic gospel singer [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#) to death for insulting the Prophet Muhammad, Shekau [publicly condemned](#) the singer's right to appeal the sentence, saying "he should just be killed. If you really sentence him, we should only hear that you slaughtered him." Shekau reportedly added that "Kano is not an Islamic State, calling it a [land of infidels](#) where democracy is practiced." In December, Boko Haram [threatened](#) to increase attacks on Christian communities during the Christmas season. The U.S. government considers Boko Haram an ["entity of particular concern"](#) for engaging in severe, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom within its areas of control.

Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP)

Boko Haram formally pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in March 2015 and was renamed Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). In 2016, [internal disagreements](#) over the treatment of Muslim civilians drove a number of senior ISWAP leaders to split from Shekau and begin a new faction under the leadership of Mamman Nur and Abu Musab al-Barnawi. ISIS leaders, [disenchanted](#) with Shekau's leadership, recognized the Nur/al-Barnawi faction as the official ISWAP cell.

Following this split, ISWAP tactics shifted from targeting civilians to focusing primarily on attacking [military targets](#) and [state actors](#). However, more recently this approach appeared to be shifting again. The group [recently attacked Muslim civilians](#) and [executed aid workers](#), which some analysts interpret as a [hardening](#) of ISWAP tactics against civilians.

Since March 2019, ISWAP has been led by Abu Abdallah al-Barnawi (no relation), more commonly known as [Ba Idrissa](#). According to recent estimates, ISWAP has roughly 4,000 fighters, making it the largest Boko Haram faction operating today. In addition to controlling areas of northeast Nigeria, ISWAP also has been [expanding its influence](#) into the northwest, [claiming attacks](#) in Sokoto State and [forging relationships](#) with communities on the border with Niger.

ISWAP also routinely engages in violations against Nigerian citizens' rights to freedom of religion and belief. [Reports indicate](#) that within its area of control, ISWAP compels people to attend prayer, prohibits smoking and the use of drugs, and implements harsh Quranic punishments, including amputations for thieves and killings for adulterers.

ISWAP has also abducted and executed individuals based on their faith or belief. The group continues to hold 17-year-old [Leah Sharibu](#) hostage for her unwillingness to convert to Islam—the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) advocates for Leah Sharibu's release through its [Religious Prisoners of Conscience project](#). In January, ISWAP abducted and [executed Ropvil Daciya Dalep](#), a Christian university student, stating "Christians all over the world must know that we will never forget their atrocities against us, until we avenge the bloodshed visited on us." In July, ISWAP soldiers [executed five aid workers](#) as a warning to "all those being used by infidels to convert Muslims to Christianity." The U.S. government has also designated ISWAP an ["entity of particular concern"](#) for engaging in severe, ongoing, and egregious violations of international religious freedom in its area of operation.

Ansaru

The "Vanguard of Aid and Protection for Muslim's in Black Africa," more commonly known as Ansaru, split from Shekau's Boko Haram in 2012 over differences in ideology regarding the treatment of Muslim civilians. The group was dormant from 2016 to 2019, following several military defeats and [the arrest of its leader](#), Khalid al-Barnawi (no relation). However, in 2020 Ansaru made a [resurgence](#) in parts of Nigeria.

Fighters from other militant Islamist groups in the region have described Ansaru's approach to jihad in Nigeria as ["excessively long-term,"](#) with their slow pace of advancement sowing frustration among other jihadist partners. The group remains relatively small,

with an estimated 400 fighters. Reports have suggested that Ansaru currently operates only in Kaduna state in northwest Nigeria.

Despite its small size and area of control, Ansaru has targeted civilians on the basis of religion or belief. For example, in August 2020, the group claimed it killed [more than 25 “apostates”](#) and wounded 10 others in attacks in Kaduna state.

Counterterrorism Efforts

Combating violent Islamist groups in northern Nigeria is a top priority for many governments in the region. The Nigerian government has conducted several military operations in northeast and northwest Nigeria aiming to neutralize militant Islamist groups and stop their expansion. These have included ground assaults like [Operations Deep Punch I & II](#) into the Sambisa Forest, as well as air assaults like [Operation Rain of Fire](#).

In some instances, neighboring countries have supported the Nigerian military in this endeavor through the [Multi-National Joint Task Force](#) (MNJTF). The MNJTF is an ad-hoc mechanism through which the military forces of countries affected by these groups (Chad, Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Benin) collaborate in joint military planning and operations and allow for cross border pursuits by counterterrorism forces into each other’s territory. Recently Chad deployed [Operation Bakouma](#) in April 2020 to dismantle violent jihadist strongholds near its borders.

In other instances, Nigerian security forces have partnered with [community militias and informal vigilante armed groups](#) in counter-Boko Haram activities. The most prominent of these—the Civilian Joint Task Force—trains and arms local recruits in Borno state to serve as the first line of defense against attacks by violent Islamist groups. This approach has yielded both successes and challenges. Community militias have both protected and harmed civilians in northeast Nigeria, and Nigerians face significant barriers in seeking redress for rights abuses perpetrated by informal militia fighters.

The result of the efforts of the Nigerian military and its partners thus far has been the effective partitioning of parts of northern Nigeria, with state actors controlling major urban centers and relocating civilians to [“supercamps”](#) so they can more easily provide protection, while various violent Salafi factions vie for control over [rural areas](#) and [major supply routes](#). Moreover, large-scale military operations in the region [often trigger](#) the eventual return of voluntary and involuntary associates of violent jihadist groups.

Counterterrorism forces have also been responsible for human rights violations and violence against civilians. In its [preliminary investigation](#) in northeast Nigeria, the ICC found reasonable basis to believe the Nigerian counterterrorism forces committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. [Research](#) conducted by the Center for Civilians in Conflict found that community militias supported by the Nigerian government to protect local populations from militant Islamist violence have committed abuses against civilians, including arbitrary detention, harassment and sexual assault, and extortion.

Moreover, legislation enacted by the Nigerian government to combat terrorist activity has also threatened the human and civil rights of Nigerian citizens. The [Terrorism Prevention Act of 2013](#) gives sweeping powers to security forces that infringe on many human rights afforded under the Nigerian constitution, including freedoms of expression and assembly and rights pertaining to detention and fair trials. Implementation of this act has [restricted humanitarian access](#) and denied life-saving support to thousands of people living outside of government-controlled areas. Additionally, the [Cybercrimes Act of 2015](#), which was enacted in part to disrupt the spread of terrorist activity online, penalizes the use of a computer system or network to intentionally threaten or publicly insult persons based on religious identity.

These challenges are situated in the broader [inability of the Nigerian government](#) to protect freedom of religion and belief for many of its citizens. In other regions, the failure of the Nigerian state to address religious freedom violations have manifested in atrocious ethnoreligious violence, attacks on houses of worship, and a culture of impunity for violators across the country.



Conclusion

Violent Islamist groups continue to pose a significant threat to religious freedom of civilians living in northern Nigeria and throughout the Lake Chad Basin. Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Ansaru have all demonstrated the capacity and intent to conduct attacks on individuals based on religion. Boko Haram and ISWAP have also imposed their interpretation of Islam onto others in their areas of control.

Regional approaches continue to put pressure on violent jihadist groups operating in this region, primarily through military operations. However, militant Islamist groups in Nigeria demonstrate remarkable staying power and threaten to *coopt and "Islamize"* other violent conflicts in Nigeria and throughout the region. Thus, these groups will likely continue to pose threats to religious freedom in Nigeria and elsewhere in the future if efforts do not adapt to address the challenges facing the current approach.

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