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Replacing the state

Jihadist insurgency in Northern Nigeria

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Brief Summary

- Military action alone is insufficient to defeat jihadist insurgency in northeast Nigeria; ISWAP persists by functioning as a proto-state providing justice and services.
- Insurgents fill the vacuum left by the state's failure to provide security and infrastructure in rural areas.
- Reclaiming authority requires replacing insurgent governance architectures with predictable state administration.
- Rapid restoration of services and civilian protection in liberated areas are vital to preventing insurgent return.
- Reintegration must address returnee expectations shaped by their experience of alternative rule.

Rebel governance, civilian control, and the military victory in Northeast Nigeria

Military action alone cannot defeat jihadist insurgency in northeast Nigeria. The Islamic State West Africa Province's (ISWAP) resilience stems from its ability to function as a proto-state – it governs, taxes, adjudicates disputes, and embeds itself in civilian life – in a context where the formal state is rarely felt by residents. Nigerian counterinsurgency efforts must therefore go beyond the military and prioritise reclaiming governance space by restoring local justice, establishing predictable taxation, providing basic services, and ensuring civilian protection in liberated areas. Where the state remains absent, insurgents will continue to operate.

Understanding insurgent endurance

Since 2009, Boko Haram and its splinter factions have been interpreted primarily through the

lenses of terrorism, ideology, and locally embedded rebellion. However, this framing obscures another important reality: insurgents' persistent presence in northeast Nigeria has relied as much on battlefield performance as on their capacity to replace core functions of the state. In many rural areas, especially near borders and forests, the Nigerian state has long failed to provide roads, electricity, justice, or security. Insurgent governance filled this vacuum before it was violently imposed.

Evidence from Borno and surrounding areas shows that insurgent groups do more than confront the Nigerian state; they compete with it. They levy taxes, police communities, adjudicate disputes, regulate markets, provide limited welfare, and enforce social norms. While JAS remains largely fragmented and fractured, ISWAP's presence continues to endure.

The contrasting trajectories of Boko Haram's factions underscore this dynamic. Under Abubakar Shekau and Bakura Doro, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) pursued governance through fear, relying on predation and violence. By contrast, ISWAP built a quasi-administrative system rooted in religious legitimacy, restraint toward civilians, and service provision. JAS has collapsed, but ISWAP's presence endures.

JAS: coercion without legitimacy

JAS developed a rigid, centralised hierarchy dominated by Shekau's personal authority and Bakura Doro, the new leader, follows in the same stead. While it mimicked state features, such as judges, tax collectors, and security units, these structures lacked accountability and were unpredictable. Decision-making was arbitrary, punishments indiscriminate, and resource distribution opaque.

Civilians under JAS control faced forced recruitment, extortion, confiscation of property, and collective punishment. Education certificates were destroyed, communities branded apostate, and violence was used to signal dominance rather than secure cooperation. Initial ideological sympathy rapidly gave way to fear, flight, and silent resistance.

This governance failure proved fatal. JAS alienated its civilian base, provoked internal dissent, and became increasingly dependent on predation and kidnapping. Military pressure accelerated its collapse, but governance failures had already weakened its position.

ISWAP: institutionalized insurgent governance

On the other hand, ISWAP has adopted a fundamentally different approach. Its leadership structure is layered, decentralized, and rule bound. Authority flows from a regional leadership through governorates, local commanders, judicial officials, tax administrators, and morality police. Decisions are mediated through councils rather than imposed by fiat. Punishments are still harsh but predictable. Violence is selective rather than indiscriminate.

ISWAP also provides basic services, including healthcare, Islamic education, sanitation, and credit, funded through taxes on agriculture and trade, and zakat. Whilst civilian compliance is rarely voluntary in a moral sense, it is rational as ISWAP's governance reduces uncertainty in a high-risk environment. Civilians are not passive victims of insurgent governance. They calculate, adapt, and negotiate their survival. As a result, there is what can best be described as conditional civilian accommodation in northeast Nigeria. This is not akin to loyalty, but compliance grounded in survival and predictability.

Military limitations

Nigeria has achieved repeated tactical successes against insurgents in the northeast. Territory has been retaken, leaders killed, and camps overrun. Yet, insurgents re-emerge because military operations are only the start of a changing of the guard. Force disrupts insurgents, but effective governance defeats them.

However, when liberated areas lack courts, police, schools, healthcare, or economic protection, insurgents can find space to return as problem solvers rather than conquerors. This reality remains a strategic blind spot in Nigeria's counter-insurgency approach.

A way forward

Defeating jihadist insurgency in northeast Nigeria requires more than force—it requires the reassertion of the state as a daily, legitimate presence in civilian life. To do this, four approaches for weakening insurgent governance and consolidating sustainable state authority are needed:

1. Effective counterinsurgency must explicitly target insurgent governance architectures, not solely their fighting capacity. Courts, taxation systems, identity documentation, and service-delivery mechanisms constitute the backbone of insurgent control and civilian compliance. Unless these systems are replaced, dismantled or rendered irrelevant, kinetic successes will remain temporary and insurgent authority will regenerate.

2. Military gains must be rapidly consolidated through the visible return of state governance in recovered areas. Significant lags between security operations and civilian governance restoration create an operational vacuum that insurgent groups are adept at re-occupying.

3. Civilian protection must be treated as a core counter-insurgency tool rather than a secondary humanitarian concern. Civilian allegiance is shaped less by ideology than by their daily experience of justice, taxation, and protection. Populations compare governing authorities based on predictability, fairness, and economic burden. Arbitrary detention, informal levies, and abuse by security forces directly strengthen insurgent legitimacy by reinforcing narratives of state injustice and exclusion.

4. Reintegration and deradicalization strategies must acknowledge and respond to the fact that many returnees have lived under alternative systems of rule for extended periods. Former combatants and affected civilians bring expectations shaped by insurgent governance, particularly around dispute resolution, taxation, and social order. Reintegration efforts that fail to engage these expectations risk relapse, non-compliance, and community rejection.

Further reading

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