

Boko Haram & Al-Shabaab:

Assessing the Campaigns Against Africa's Most Successful Jihadist Insurgencies and How the United States Can Protect Vulnerable Christian Populations

BY: MAX J. PROWANT

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ABSTRACT

Boko Haram (also known as Islamic State West African Province or ISWAP) and al-Shabaab are two of the most notorious yet under studied jihadist insurgency groups. This is surprising given both the troubling success of each and their striking similarities. For example, both emerged in the 2000s as local insurgencies, both coordinated with larger jihadist organizations including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS), both controlled large swaths of territories, and both continue to operate despite multi-national coalitional efforts to eradicate them. As a result of their shared Sunni jihadist ideology, both are virulently anti-Christian as well. Christians are facing what many call a genocide in Nigeria (the host country of Boko Haram) and Christians in Somalia (the host country of al-Shabaab) have become virtually non-existent. As a human rights organization with particular interest in the protection of Christian minorities, In Defense of Christians (IDC) leads the charge in encouraging policymakers to reorient the counterinsurgency strategies against Boko Haram and al-Shabaab. The following report aims to give policymakers a thorough understanding of the two groups and policy prescriptions for mitigating their threat.

KEY JUDGEMENTS

1. Nigeria and Somalia represent important test cases for how the United States should (and should not) undertake counterinsurgency strategies against jihadist organizations in Africa. The two countries are sufficiently alike to merit comparative study using a “Most Similar” research design.
2. Broadly speaking, the United States has supported host countries and operations that have prioritized “kinetic,” military victory over insurgent groups without coupling this victory with concerted efforts to address the underlying grievances that fuel conflict.
3. In Nigeria, the United States should make future military aid contingent on holding accountable generals responsible for human rights abuses or “war crimes”; civilian oversight of military handling of terrorist detainees; and coordinated program between the state and federal levels for reintegration of former Boko Haram affiliates.
4. In Somalia, the United States should make further aid contingent on a resolution between the FGS and FMS; a coordinated program for reintegration of former Al-Shabaab affiliates. The U.S. should also reduce its military approach and invest in development of basic services.

INTRODUCTION

Sunni Jihadism in its strongest form now exists on the fringes of the Islamic world. A decade ago, Sunni, transnational jihadists focused the bulk of their efforts on the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. Today, their most successful theatre is in Africa. According to the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project, "at least 35 African countries are experiencing Salafi-Jihadi insurgencies today, compared to 14 in 2015."¹ In a continent whose economic and developmental potential is only beginning to be tapped, and whose future has become part of the global contest between China, Russia, and the United States, the mitigation of these insurgencies is well within the broader strategic interest of the United States.

The rise of African jihadism should occasion an alliance, if only momentary, between realists who see crises through the lens of narrow national interests and those idealists who hold strong to the belief that the United States has a missionary project yet to be fulfilled in spreading liberty and equality. Among this latter group, those who are most concerned are those sentinels of international religious freedom. The stronger the foothold of transnational jihadists, the more precarious the position of religious minorities, be they Christian, Muslim, or even animist. Moderate Muslims tend to bear the brunt of jihadist terror attacks. But Christians, too, are special targets for dramatic violence. Perhaps the most chilling reminder of this fact is the 2015 execution of twenty-one Egyptian Coptic Christians by ISIS on the shores of Libya. That Christians remain primary targets can be seen in Nigeria. On Pentecost Sunday, 2022, a cell allegedly connected to the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), murdered forty laypersons during a Catholic mass.

Reports of Christian villages being raided or of priests being kidnapped or murdered emerge from Nigeria with striking regularity.²

Whether one inclines more strongly towards the realist or idealist camp, success in Africa will require a nuanced and coordinated approach to counterinsurgency. Insurgencies can be prolonged and effective—the average length of an insurgency is 12 years.³ Insurgents thrive in countries with weak state institutions and feed on economic, religious, ethnic, and other social grievances. In a 2016 study, RAND scholar Seth G. Jones found that since WWII, there have been 181 conflicts that meet the criteria for an insurgency, over 50 of which have been Islamist-inspired. Of the insurgencies that ended, 35% resulted in the insurgent group overthrowing the government or gaining independence; governments defeated insurgents 36% of the time; the remaining 29% ended in a draw.⁴ Taken collectively, these findings bode turbulent years ahead for many of Africa's countries already teetering on the brink.

To the end of helping design a prudent strategy of containing and eventually defeating the trend of jihadist insurgencies in Africa, this report offers a comparative case study analysis of two of Africa's longest-running Islamist insurgencies and the efforts to end them: the Boko Haram-ISWAP insurgency in Nigeria and the Al-Shabaab insurgency in Somalia. These insurgencies are particularly instructive for American policymakers to better understand the road ahead. Not only have they both lasted longer than the 12-year average lifespan of insurgencies, but they both highlight the interconnected issues of subduing jihadist militants in host

1 Estelle-Perez, Emily. "Secure Communities: Stopping the Salafi-Jihadi Surge in Africa." American Enterprise Institute. February, 2023. Pg. 3.

2 See, for example, Zengarini, Lisa. "Over 50,000 Christians Killed in Nigeria by Islamic Extremists." *Vatican News*. April 17, 2023. According to Open Doors, Nigeria accounts for 89% of global cases of documented Christian persecution.

3 Jones, Seth G. *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State*. Oxford University Press. 2016. Pg. 5.

4 Jones, Seth G. *Waging Insurgent Warfare*. Pg. 9.

countries with weak state institutions, rampant corruption, poor coordination with regional actors, and counterproductive approaches to counterinsurgency. Understanding the various factors, institutional, human, and cultural, that have prolonged these conflicts may help Washington avert similar quagmires when confronting the recent spread of Salafi-jihadism in Africa. More specifically, this report emphasizes that a counterinsurgency strategy emphasizing military victory is insufficient to containing jihadist actors. While often necessary, such a response conducted without serious planning on part of the host country to resolve the political and economic grievances that helped produce the insurgency will only prolong the conflict by reinforcing those very grievances.

The report proceeds as follows. First, it discusses in more detail why Nigeria and Somalia merit comparative study and some notes on methodology. The report is then divided into two sections. The first section is dedicated to Nigeria. The second focuses on Somalia. In each section the report discusses the history and background of the jihadist insurgency, the ideology of the jihadist group in question, the international and regional responses to the conflict, and the approach to counterinsurgency. Each section concludes with policy recommendations for the United States to leverage from the host countries.

TERMINOLOGY AND A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

When using the term, “insurgency” the report follows the definition employed by Jones: an insurgency is a “political and military campaign by a non-state group (or groups) to overthrow a regime or secede from a country.”⁵ The insurgencies in Nigeria and Somalia meet these qualifications and the additional set of criteria

employed by Jones: at least 1,000 combatant-battle deaths sustained over the course of the conflict with a yearly minimum of 25 deaths *and* at least 100 combatant-battle deaths sustained by each side (government and insurgent) over the course of the conflict.⁶

These qualifications are particularly relevant when approaching the various conflicts in Nigeria. First, a single insurgency can consist of multiple insurgent groups. Accordingly, the report treats as a single phenomenon the attempts by jihadist groups in the country’s northeast to secede from Nigeria and eventually overthrow the regime. While this conflict has been waged by two, closely related groups, Boko Haram and ISWAP, the report will treat the two groups’ efforts as a single insurgency. Second, insurgencies seek to either secede from or overthrow an existing political regime. This is the expressed goal of Boko Haram and ISWAP. It is not, however, the clear goal of other groups engaging in political, religious, or ethnic violence. While many Fulani herdsmen, for example, seem sympathetic to Salafi-jihadi ideology, there is no clear indication that the violence engaged in by Fulani herdsmen is revolutionary in character or systemically organized in such a manner as to challenge state existence. Fulani radicalization and violence are of serious concern, but they will not be discussed in this report.

Regarding methodology, this report employs a qualitative comparative case study analysis using “Most Similar” research design. Despite many palpable differences in the political histories of Nigeria and Somalia, their experience with jihadist insurgencies reveal sufficiently strong similarities to merit comparative study. There are four factors in particular worth mentioning. The first similarity is the **character** of the insurgent groups. The jihadist insurgent groups in Nigeria and Somalia (Boko Haram-ISWAP and Al-Shabaab, respectively) are both transnational Salafi-jihadist groups that

⁵ Jones. *Waging Insurgent Warfare*. 7.

⁶ Jones. *Waging Insurgent Warfare*. 7, 13.

blend local concerns with globalist aspirations. Both groups must balance local grievances and cultural inclinations particular to their areas of origin and operation with the expansive demands of their similar religious ideologies. Both groups are connected to larger, global terror networks, enjoy international financing, and target international actors. Second, both Nigeria and Somalia have **weak state institutions**. While Nigeria actually enjoys a functioning state that has in the past proven capable of quelling rebellion, its presence in the northeast states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa (the sites of the insurgency) is either weak or virtually non-existent.⁷ In a similar vein, the Somali government is still in its genesis and has little authority or presence in the southern part of the country where Al-Shabaab often operates freely. Third, both countries have enjoyed **substantial military aid** from international and regional powers, particularly from the

United States. The scale and character of this aid is different: the U.S. role in Somalia is more direct than in Nigeria. But both conflicts have become the site of international coordination and intervention.⁸ Finally, the **insurgencies in both countries have proven surprisingly resilient** despite tactical military successes on part of the state and international actors. The Boko Haram insurgency began in 2009 and is now on its fourteenth year. The Al-Shabaab insurgency began in 2006, and it now in its seventeenth year.

Because of these similarities, a comparison between Nigeria and Somalia may yield valuable insights into the common issues that arise in conducting successful counterinsurgency strategies against Salafi-jihadist groups in Africa and useful lessons for future engagements on the continent.

7 Some experts argue that Nigeria is either on the brink of becoming a failed state, or is already a failed state. See Campbell, Joseph "The Giant of Africa is Failing." *Foreign Affairs*. May 31, 2021.

8 What scholar Paul D. Williams calls the "AMISOM" model of counterterrorism in Somalia could easily be applied to Nigeria, as this report will make clear. See Williams, Paul D. "Subduing Al-Shabaab: The Somalia Model of Counterterrorism and its Limits." *The Washington Quarterly*. 2018.

Nigeria



HISTORY OF THE BOKO HARAM-ISWAP INSURGENCY

ORIGINS OF THE CONFLICT

As ISIS was capturing headlines, Boko Haram was becoming the deadliest terrorist group in the world. It began in the early 2000s as a loose network of mosques headed by the radical preacher, Mohammed Yusuf. Yusuf was a charismatic preacher who first emerged as an outspoken critic of Nigeria's secularism, and particularly its state-run education system.¹ Education would be a defining concern of Boko Haram – the phrase “Boko Haram” is slang that is often translated as “Western education is forbidden.”² Throughout the early 2000s, Yusuf developed a loyal following and challenged many of the traditional religious leaders in Maiduguri, Borno state. As Yusuf became increasingly problematic for state and local authorities, his teachings became more radical. Eventually a militant wing of Boko Haram emerged, leading to isolated skirmishes with Nigerian police in 2007.³ By the Spring of 2009, members of Boko Haram were routinely being sent to training camps. The growing tension between Boko Haram and government authorities reached a tipping point that summer. In June, 2009 Yusuf released his “Open Letter to the Federal Government of Nigeria” calling for a mass uprising.⁴

In response to the 2009 uprising, the Nigerian government acted as it had done in the past with insurgencies: it attempted to simply annihilate the perpetrators. Nigerian forces came down hard on the group. It detained Yusuf and executed him without a trial and chased the scattered remnants of Boko Haram deep into the

jungle of Borno province, away from their urban enclaves. As happened before and throughout its war with Islamist insurgents, the government demonstrated little moderation or willingness to adhere to proper legal enforcement. As a result, the government succeeded in temporarily handicapping the Boko Haram network, but its brutality laid the seeds for popular sympathies for the Islamist group in the future.

After the failed uprising, the remainder of Boko Haram began to slowly regroup and re-assess its strategy. Yusuf was succeeded by his long-time deputy, Abubaker Shekau, a hardliner who long encouraged violent uprising but lacked the grand eloquence and popular charisma of Yusuf. Despite this, Shekau was able to rebuild Boko Haram into the deadliest terrorist organization yet seen.⁵ Under Shekau's leadership the group began to look more like a transnational jihadist organization than one concerned primarily with local grievances. It attempted to strengthen its (at the time, tenuous) connections with al-Qaeda by reaching out for funds and training. It was successful. Beginning in 2011, the group adopted the signature suicide bomber tactic and targeted symbols of international hegemony. In that year, for example, it successfully bombed the United Nations headquarters in Abuja, killing 21 and injuring more than 70.⁶ But it also deviated from al-Qaeda's tactics by adopting somehow more gruesome methods. For example, it began using women and children as suicide bombers against a variety of targets (churches and government buildings received

1 Thurston, Alexander. *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*. Princeton University Press, 2018. For a thorough discussion of the relation between “dashed hopes” of Nigeria's education system and the rise of Boko Haram see in particular 82-90.

2 Thurston, Alexander. *Boko Haram*. 14.

3 Thurston, Alexander. *Boko Haram*. 130.

4 Thurston, Alexander. *Boko Haram*. 133. See the letter in *Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State*. Trans. Abdulbasit Kassim. 179-198.

5 Pisa, Katie and Tim Hume. “Boko Haram Overtakes ISIS as World's Deadliest Terror Group, Report Says.” CNN. November 19, 2015.

6 BBC. “Abuja attack: Car bomb hits Nigeria UN building.” August 27, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14677957>

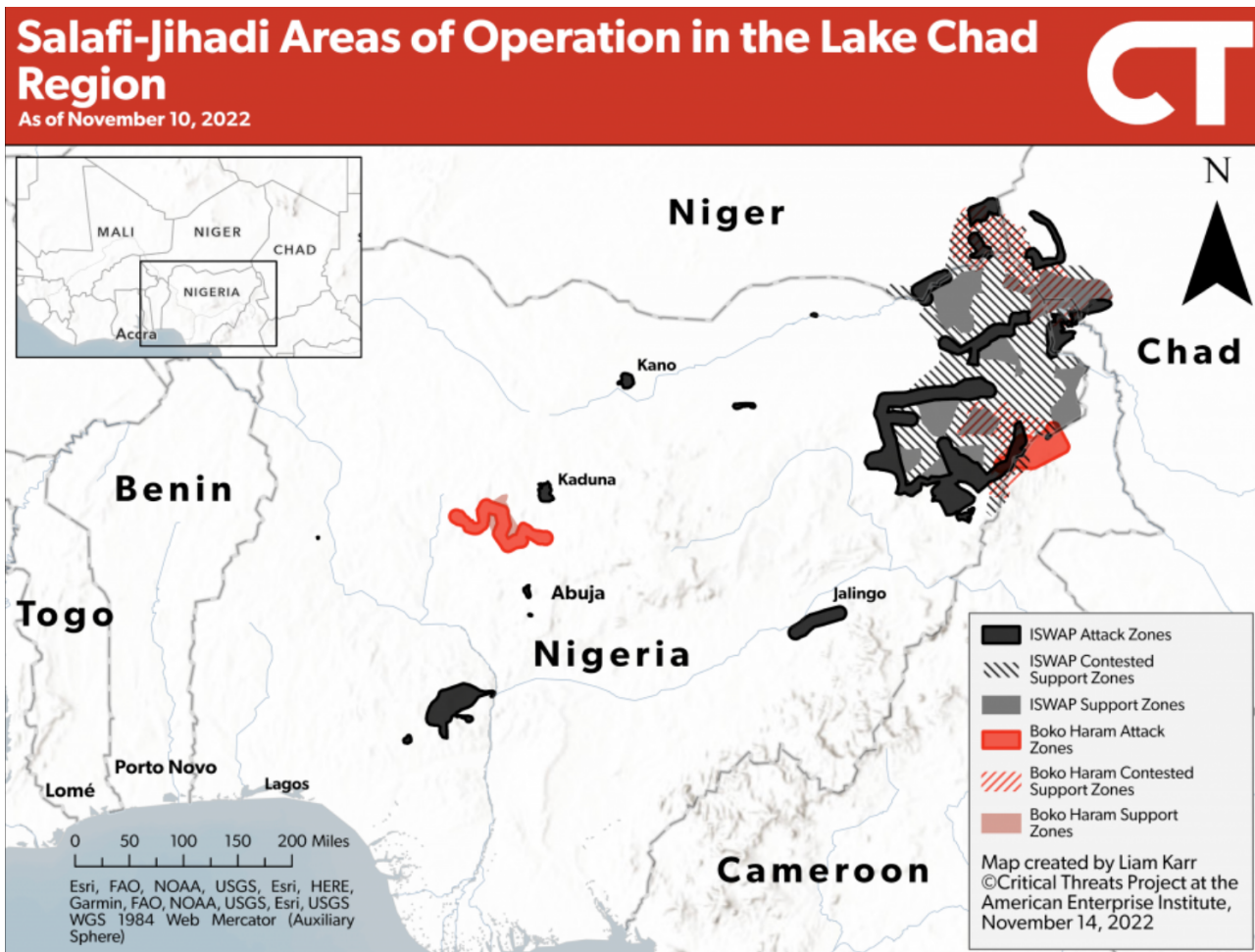
the brunt). It reached peak notoriety in 2014 when it kidnapped 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, launching the viral social media plea to “bring back our girls.”

The use of women and children is not the only substantive way that Boko Haram deviated from al-Qaeda. Whereas al-Qaeda had always refrained from conquering territory, Boko Haram began consolidating its authority over large swaths of territory in Nigeria’s northeast, as well as pockets of land in neighboring Chad and Cameroon. The group’s brutality and emphasis on capturing territory highlight how the group was always more in-step with the Islamic State than with al-Qaeda. This tendency

was confirmed when in 2015 Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.

BOKO HARAM AND ISIS

By the time Shekau pledged allegiance to ISIS, Nigeria was in the thralls of an all-out insurgency. Tens of thousands had died in the conflict with Nigeria’s security forces and as many as two million had been displaced. At the same time, the group had consolidated its authority in much of Borno state and throughout the Lake Chad basin. By one estimate, the group controlled approximately 20,000 square miles of territory.⁷ There is no question that Boko



<https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-areas-of-operation-in-the-lake-chad-basin>

7 Varin, Caroline. “No Opportunity Lost: The ISWAP Insurgency in the Changing Climate of Lake Chad Region.” *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*. 2020. 142.

Haram had become the most pressing security challenge in a country already juggling a number of internal conflicts. But precisely because of the group's astonishing success, its resources and manpower were spread thin. Accordingly, the turn to ISIS was a result of both calculative expediency and ideological consistency. Boko Haram needed resources and ISIS was at the time the most prestigious and well-funded group in the transnational jihadist theatre. It was also the most ideologically similar, with both groups following the maniacal teachings of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The turn may have also reflected another pressing need: how to govern its now consolidated land holdings.

Despite the clear logic of the shift, the alliance between Boko Haram and the Islamic State was short lived. In 2016, just two years after the pledge, two distinct factions emerged in the newly launched Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP, aka ISWA). Shekau led the faction which reverted back to the name, Boko Haram, while ISWAP marched under the leadership of Barnawi (an alleged son of Muhammed Yusuf). The split seems to be the result of two factors: personality conflict and differing strategic assessments of the conflict. To the first point, Shekau seemed loath to relinquish his command over the group to the foreign power of ISIS. This underlines the local character of the movement; Boko Haram was a Nigerian phenomenon emerging out of local grievances before it became an international jihadist phenomenon bent on aligning itself with al-Qaeda and ISIS. To the second point, the ISWAP faction actually proved more moderate than Shekau's. While both factions were perfectly happy to use the label "apostate" against Muslim enemies, Shekau considered nearly every Muslim who did not expressly support his movement as an apostate. In fact, Boko Haram under his leadership killed more

Muslims than Christians.⁸ The ISWAP faction, by contrast, sought to focus efforts on targeting government authorities (the true apostates) and Christians (the infidels).

ISWAP proved to be the more resilient group. While both ISWAP and Boko Haram had to square off with Nigerian security forces and the militaries of a multinational task force (see below), by 2020 most observers agreed that ISWAP has surpassed Boko Haram as the more pressing security threat in Nigeria.⁹ Its success is due largely to its strategy to win the hearts and minds of local Muslims. Whereas Boko Haram, either out of nihilistic rage¹⁰ or honest commitment to the worst demands of its guiding ideology, had targeted all it deemed apostates, ISWAP was more willing to overlook doctrinal deviations. Instead of murdering deviants, it sought to win them over to the cause by providing basic services to those under its reign. It gave jobs to new recruits, provided micro-loans for Muslims to start or rebuild businesses, and provided basic services.¹¹ It did not blame Muslims for their woes, but on the corruption of the Nigerian government. In many ways, ISWAP became what Boko Haram had originally intended to be: an Islamist movement that provides services for its constituents.

By 2018, the two factions had relatively well-defined areas of operation. Shekau's Boko Haram operated in Southern Borno state in the Sambisa forest and along the border with Cameroon while Barnawi's ISWAP was largely confined to the shores and islands of Lake Chad in northern Borno.¹² As Shekau faced continuous military pressure and a population disaffected with Yusuf's earlier promises (as a result of indiscriminate massacres), Barnawi's ISWAP made strides in consolidating its holdings and winning the hearts of the indigenous population. Despite resorting to

8 Campbell, John. "Conflict in Nigeria is More Complicated than 'Christians vs. Muslims.'" Council on Foreign Relations. May 1, 2019. Campbell notes that Muslims bear most of the brunt primarily because Boko Haram is centered in predominantly Muslim areas.

9 See, for example International Crisis Group. "After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria's North East." March 29, 2022.

10 See the discussion of Boko Haram in Robinson, Glenn E. *Global Jihad: A Brief History*. Stanford University, 2020. 150-167.

11 International Crisis Group. "After Shekau."

12 Verin, Caroline. "No Opportunity Lost." 143.

kidnapping for ransom and extortion, ISWAP was and is often viewed sympathetically by locals for its protection and war against corrupt authorities, both local and federal.¹³

The hostilities between Boko Haram and ISWAP reached a tipping point in 2021 when a skirmish led to the death of Shekau. By this time both groups had been weakened by continuous infighting and confrontation with the Nigerian authorities. After Shekau's death, analysts were unanimous in their estimates that ISWAP had become the more resilient faction. While weakened from continued infighting, regular clashes with the remnants of Boko Haram, and continued pressure from Nigerian and regional security forces, ISWAP is still estimated to have 4,000 to 5,000 fighters, controls lands beyond the reach of state authorities, and enjoys seemingly steady support from those under its control.

What is more, in 2022 ISWAP expanded its cells into central Nigeria. In April 2022 the group carried out its first attack in central Nigeria and plotted an attack in the country's capital, Abuja.¹⁴ In June 2022, it made international headlines when it executed the massacre of Nigerian Catholics in Owo on Pentecost Sunday, killing forty laypersons including children. The group also has strong ties with Islamic State - Greater Sahel (ISGS), which remains heavily active in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Similarly, the group remains loyal to the broader ISIS organization. In December 2022 it pledged loyalty to the new ISIS leader, Abu Husayn al-Qurayshi. At the same time, Boko Haram continues to regroup after the death of Shekau. In December 2022, the remnants killed thirty-three wives of ISWAP fighters, highlighting how personal the conflict between the two groups has become.¹⁵ Former Boko-Haram members have joined bandit groups in the country's north and a splinter group, Ansaru, with alleged ties to al-Qaeda, is reportedly on the rise in Kaduna state, just north of the capitol.

Despite losses and in-fighting, Boko Haram and ISWAP remain active and continue to pose a threat to Nigerian security and the country's Christian population. While weakened, there is plenty of cause for concern. First, both groups have demonstrated incredible resilience in the past. Boko Haram in particular has shown a pattern of approaching annihilation only to resurface shortly after. As long as Nigeria's northeast remains beyond the reach of the state authorities, the region will be an incubator for violent fanaticism.

IDEOLOGY AND THE CHRISTIAN NARRATIVE

In theological outlook, there appears to be no discernable or effectual difference between Boko Haram and Islamic State West African Province. Both are rooted squarely in the Salafi-Jihadi movement. Broadly speaking, Salafi Muslims seek to return Islam to the simple pristine practices of the first four generations of Muslims. Accordingly they attempt to abide by an austere version of Islamic law (Sharia). Best known for scraggly beards and gowns showing skinny ankles, Salafis most widely diverge on the means of return to the Islamic golden age. Quietests generally eschew violence and prefer to gradually transform Muslim societies bottom-up through charitable works and proselytization. An imperfect example is the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Other Salafis prefer a top down approach that emphasizes the violent overthrow of secular state authorities in order to forcefully impose their extreme conservatism upon society. These violent types usually promote jihad to a pillar of Islam equivalent to or greater than the other pillars. It is telling, then, that the first to refer to a "Salafi-Jihadi" movement was Ayman al-Zawahiri, co-founder and former leader of al-Qaeda.¹⁶

13 International Crisis Group. "After Shekau."

14 Karr, Liam. "Salafi-Jihadi Areas of Operation in the Lake Chad Basin." Critical Threats Project. November 29, 2022.

15 The Counterterrorism Group. "Boko Haram Kills 33 Wives of ISWAP Fighters." December 6, 2022.

16 Maher, Shiraz. *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*. Penguin Press. 2016. 16.

Per the Salafi-Jihadi worldview, God is absolutely omniscient and omnipotent. Salafis place particularly strong emphasis on the concept of *Tawhid*, usually translated as “oneness” or “monotheism.” *Tawhid* strictly prohibits the worship of anything other than God.¹⁷ Salafis apply this prohibition to a wide range of practices common in the rest of the world. Democracy, for example, is often derided as a false idol, or rather, a competing god. More extreme types, such as Boko Haram’s founder, Mohammed Yusef, even go so far as to label modern science as a false idol.¹⁸ The implication of this is severe. An ordinary Muslim who advocates on behalf of democracy, the secular nation state, or even scientific education, engages in a form of idol-worship and must therefore be condemned as an apostate. For this reason, ordinary Muslims (even those who are somewhat conservative in outlook) often bear the brunt of Salafi-Jihadi violence. In Nigeria, the majority of Boko Haram’s victims have been Muslims.¹⁹

The at once both expansive and austere application of *Tawhid* also carries heavy implications for individual conduct. In the Salafi worldview, *Tawhid* requires absolute belief in Allah. Implicit in this belief are the outward manifestations of internal belief in the form of worship. If one is a true believer, then he must demonstrate this through the strict adherence to Sharia. In other words, profession of Islamic faith is not sufficient for Salafi-Jihadists to be considered a Muslim. One must abide by *all* the dictates of their austere version of Sharia; to the extent that one deviates from this path, one runs the risk of apostasy.

This version of *Tawhid* also helps explain why both Boko Haram and ISWAP are comfortable

targeting Christians in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. Traditionally, Islamic law accords special status to Christians as *ahl al-kitaab* (people of the Book). In the Qur’an, Jesus is recognized as a legitimate prophet of God’s, but he is denied divine status; he is usually referred to as Jesus, Son of Mary to note his decisively human origins.²⁰ Because Christians follow, albeit imperfectly, one of God’s prophets, they are allocated in traditional Islam a status above that of pagans and idol-worshippers. Accordingly, they were often granted the right to practice their faith in Muslim lands under *dhimmi* status.²¹ The technicalities of these laws and their application varied, but Christians were generally left to administer themselves so long as they paid a special, and often high, tax to the reigning Islamic authorities.²²

Christians are given no such special treatment by either Boko Haram or ISWAP. In fact, they are often targeted relentlessly because of their faith. Since the early days of the Boko Haram insurgency, the group has targeted Christian churches. The practice continued with ISWAP who has tried to position itself in somewhat more moderate fashion than Boko Haram. Part of the reason for why members of these groups believe it is permissible to kill Christians with such impunity is that their theological outlook labels apostate or pagan anyone who does not accept their teaching, or worse, anyone who explicitly advocates for the idols of democracy and secularism. Given the privileged place of Christians in the Qur’an, these jihadists are not so much textualists as they are “Tawhidists.”

Christian persecution is not justified solely on theological grounds, however. Nigeria is a country evenly divided between a predominantly

17 Maher, Shiraz. *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*. Penguin Press. 2016. 15.

18 Boko Haram Reader, 40.

19 Campbell, Joseph. “Conflict in Nigeria is More Complicated than ‘Christians vs. Muslims.’”

20 See, for example, Qur’an 5:116.

21 For a helpful discussion, see Lambton, Ann K.S. *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory*. Routledge. 1981. 203-208; Lewis, Bernard. *The Political Language of Islam*. University of Chicago Press. 1988. 76-77.

22 Even in “secular” Arab dictatorships today, Christians may not have to pay a special *dhimmi* tax, but they are routinely treated as second-class citizens. Consider the recent case in Egypt of the orphan, Shenouda. See Tadros, Samuel. “His Name Is Shenouda.” *Compact*. May 29, 2023.

Muslim north and a predominantly Christian South. Historically, the Christian south has been more economically well off, more well-educated, and enjoyed a higher standard of living than the Muslim north. This disproportion feeds into a narrative that Muslim suffering is at the hands of Christians. Another common narrative is that Christians conspire with Western and colonial powers to weaken Islam. According to Bishop Matthew Kookah from the Sokoto province, this view is common even among more secular-leaning Muslims.²³ Thus, Boko Haram in its early days, when the core of its founding mission was opposition to state-mandated, modern education, blamed Christians for supplanting traditional Islamic education systems. The United States' and Western powers' aid to the Nigerian government is further proof, in the eyes of Boko Haram and ISWAP, of Christian collusion with Western powers.

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE AND COUNTER INSURGENCY

The international community was slow to respond to the Boko Haram insurgency. In the beginning stages, when Nigerian authorities clamped down hard on the movement and killed Yusuf, Nigerian officials were right to downplay the threat. But as the situation grew steadily more dire in the 2010-2013 period, Nigerian authorities continued downplaying the nature of the threat. Accordingly, international donors in Western Europe and North America were slow to respond with aid packages.²⁴ By the time it became clear that Boko Haram had organized a full-scale insurgency in the northeast, international donors had done little to coordinate a serious counterinsurgency plan or programs for sustained development and stability in the northeast.

Despite substantial funding and ambitious regional and international projects, the ability

to consolidate military victory over jihadist insurgents has been consistently undermined by two factors for which the Nigerian government is mostly responsible. First, counterinsurgency responses have heavily relied on overpowering military prowess that was at one point in time necessary, but when done without long-term planning for effective stabilization efforts, had the foreseeable consequence of pushing populations into the arms of jihadist groups, be they Boko Haram or ISWAP. Second, the excesses of this overly militarized response were exacerbated by consistent brutalities at the hands of primarily Nigerian military personnel. The combined effect of these factors has prolonged the conflict, contributed to the narrative peddled by jihadist groups, and made a once achievable victory seem further and further afar.

REGIONAL RESPONSE

In early 2015, countries in the Lake Chad basin (Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin) organized the Multi National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to combat Boko Haram after the group had seized territories in pockets of the affected countries. Formerly authorized by the African Union (AU) in 2015, the task force amassed just eight thousand troops.²⁵ The MNJTF was commended by international bodies which encouraged financing, such as the United Nations Security Council, the United Nations General Assembly, and the European Union (Res. 2349).

The force at times proved effective at curbing jihadi ambitions, but its military victories were routinely undermined by the Nigerian state's inability to consolidate military victories. As a 2020 report commissioned by the International Crisis Group (ICG) noted, "[MNJTF] advances against Boko Haram and its offshoots have mostly been short-lived. Jihadist factions have consistently weathered offensives.

²³ Interview with author, September, 2022.

²⁴ Brechenmacher, Saskia. "Stabilizing Northeast Nigeria after Boko Haram." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. May 03, 2019.

²⁵ International Crisis Group. "What Role for the Multinational Joint Task Force in Fighting Boko Haram?" July 7, 2020.

Their resilience owes partly to their ability to escape to other areas and partly to the inability of the states themselves, particularly Nigeria, to follow military operations with efforts to rebuild and improve conditions for residents of the recaptured areas.²⁶

To be sure, the failure of the MNJTF to root out the jihadists, establish state control, and enact a successful program of recalibration and stabilization is not the sole fault of the Nigerian government. Not only were these ambitious goals, but the task force suffered from a number of larger, structural issues which hampered coordination. For example, the soldiers from the participating countries were not blended together but were separated according to nationality.²⁷ Similarly, political disagreements between member states further inhibited coordination and intelligence sharing. Finally, the civilian oversight was underfunded and struggled to establish authority over the task force. These structural limitations notwithstanding, the task force proved militarily effective. Decisively, what lacked was the political will, primarily in Abuja, to capitalize on these initial successes.

WESTERN RESPONSE

After Boko Haram kidnapped 200 schoolgirls from Chibok, the jihadist insurgency captured the attention of Western governments, particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union.

By a large margin the United States has contributed the most to the effort to suppress the insurgency in the form of international aid and military support. Between the fiscal years of 2014 and 2020, the U.S. State Department

and USAID contributed roughly \$2.3 billion in aid to the Lake Chad Basin with most of the funding earmarked for Nigeria.²⁸ The bulk of this aid took the form of humanitarian and medical assistance. It has also contributed substantially to Nigeria's security sector. Between 2000 and 2021, the U.S. provided \$232 million in security sector assistance and \$593 in foreign military sales.²⁹ In the same timespan, the United States provided more than 41,000 training courses to Nigerian military personnel. In April, 2022 total American foreign military sales to Nigeria increased dramatically when the Biden administration approved nearly a billion dollar sale of 24 Bell AH-1Z Viper helicopters with related equipment and training. This is the largest foreign military sale to Sub-Saharan Africa to date.³⁰ What is more, between 2015 and 2020, the United States African Command (AFRICOM) maintained a force of 300 military personnel in Cameroon for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. The operation was ended under the Trump administration.³¹

American military assistance to Nigeria, be it in the form of training, FMS, or other security sector assistance, has not been consistent. Since the Obama administration in particular, military aid has been the subject of fierce domestic criticism in the United States, with NGOs, activists, and congressmen alike condemning the regime in Abuja for human rights abuses. Accordingly, in 2014, the Obama administration blocked the sale of American-origin attack helicopters from Israel to Nigeria. Again in 2017, after Nigerian forces bombed civilians, the administration froze plans to sell 12 A-29 Super Tucano aircrafts, a move undone by the Trump administration. The Trump administration's approval of the sale and the Biden administration's 2022 approval of the much larger sale of Viper helicopters highlights

26 International Crisis Group. "What Role for the Multinational Joint Task Force?"

27 International Crisis Group. "What Role for the International Joint Task Force?"

28 Congressional Research Service. "Boko Haram and the Islamic States West Africa Province." February 24, 2022.

29 "U.S. Security Partnerships and the Protection of Civilians: The Case of Nigeria and the Nigerian Armed Forces (NAF)." Brown University, Security Assistance Monitor, and InterAction. May, 2022.

30 PBS. "U.S. Approves \$1 Billion Arms Sale to Nigeria Despite Human Rights Record." April 14, 2022.

31 Husted, Tomas F. "Boko Haram and the Islamic State West African Province." Council on Foreign Relations. Feb. 2022.

and increased commitment of the United States to support the Nigerian military despite persistent, bi-partisan criticism.³²

In addition to the United States' generous contributions, other Western powers have helped foot the bill for Nigeria's response to the insurgency. In terms of country-to-country, bilateral aid, the United Kingdom is a distant second to the United States. The UK shares many interests in Nigeria, cultural, political, and economic. Culturally, the UK is connected to Nigeria through its legacy of colonialism. In terms of political and economic interests, it shares the concerns of other Western powers: Nigeria is a regional and continental powerhouse whose state failure would conjure a host of international issues. Strategically, too, the UK fears its loss of influence in the region to the growing presence of Russia and China.

Accordingly, the UK has invested heavily in both military and humanitarian aid. On the military side, London maintains the British Military Advisory and Training Team (BMATT) and the Liaison and Support Team (LST) based in Nigeria's northeast. British military personnel have trained Nigerian soldiers in counterterrorism tactics, airfield defense, and leadership.³³ Since 2015, the UK has approved at least 53 million pounds worth of military sales to Nigeria.³⁴ On the humanitarian side, the British government has been more generous. In 2018, the country pledged 13 million pounds to a program designed to prevent radicalization of schoolchildren caught in rural areas in the northeast. In 2017, then foreign minister Boris Johnson visited Maiduguri after which the UK announced an additional 200 million pounds in aid. According to the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), over 75% of this aid is for human development, economic development, and humanitarian aid.³⁵

As in the United States, the United Kingdom's contributions to Nigeria and support for the Nigerian armed forces has faced heavy domestic scrutiny and controversy. According to an internal briefing paper in the British department of defense, British "engagement [in Nigeria] is not risk free and the shadow of human rights violations is always present."³⁶ The "reputational risk" in part explains why the British military assistance has been small relative to US support and why they have opted for selling non-lethal equipment to Nigeria.³⁷

COUNTERINSURGENCY AND THE DANGERS OF "KINETIC RESPONSE"

Equipped with substantial regional and international support, Nigeria was poised in the mid-2010s to conduct a successful counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign against Boko Haram that could have both neutralized the security threat and allowed for state-sponsored development of the northeast corridor. In the early years of the COIN operations, the Nigeria military adopted a "kinetic" or heavily militarized response to quell the violence and re-take territory occupied by Boko Haram. At the time, this response was appropriate; Boko Haram controlled extensive territory and towns in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa and necessitated a robust response. But the Nigeria military, specifically the Joint Task Force and Division 7, was reckless in its response and failed to follow military success with proactive efforts to consolidate victory and stabilize the affected areas. What is more, its recklessness manifesting in human rights abuses and alleged crimes against humanity only served to legitimate the insurgents among the indigenous population and prolong the conflict today. In fact, Nigerian recklessness not

32 Psalidakis, Daphne. "U.S. Congress Members Seek to Halt \$1 Billion Nigeria Weapons Deal." *Reuters*. February 16, 2023; Senator Cory Booker, Press Release. "Booker, Paul Raise Alarms to State Department Over Nigeria Weapons Deal." June 8, 2017.

33 Tar and Bala, 220.

34 Lewis, Davis, et al. "Uneasy Allies: As The West Backs Nigeria's War on Insurgents, It Backs off on Human Rights." *Reuters*. December 28, 2022.

35 Department for International Development. "DFID Nigeria." July 2018. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/913349/Nigeria-Profile.pdf

36 Lewis, Davis, et al. "Uneasy Allies." *Reuters*.

37 Lewis, Davis, et al. "Uneasy Allies." *Reuters*.

only prolonged the conflict, but allowed jihadist-inspired operatives to spread throughout the north of the country and central and southwest areas of the country.

The counterinsurgency as we understand it today began in 2012 when then Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states. According to data compiled by the Nigeria Security Tracker (NST), a program sponsored by the Council on Foreign Affairs, while the violence between Boko Haram and state actors gradually increased between 2012 and 2014, the early part of the latter year saw a sharp increase in all metrics: monthly deaths, monthly incidents of violence, monthly deaths of civilians, and monthly deaths of Boko Haram fighters.

Since mid-2011, the deadliest month on record in Nigeria is March, 2014 with 3,456 total violent deaths recorded in the country. 2,229 of those deaths were Boko Haram fighters. The second highest monthly death toll of Boko Haram fighters is February, 2015 when 1,896 fighters were killed. Between January, 2014 and June, 2015, 10,081 civilians were killed in the conflict with Boko Haram in addition to 10,001 Boko Haram fighters. These numbers stand in stark contrast to the total civilian and Boko Haram deaths between January, 2020 and June, 2021. In this time, the number of Boko Haram fighter deaths and civilian deaths as a result of this conflict decreased to 2,796 and 901 respectively. The high tolls of Boko Haram fighter deaths between 2014 and 2015 highlights the urgency of Nigerian armed forces in attempting to quell the insurgency.³⁸

This urgency, however, was coupled with a corresponding brutality that reveals flagrant disregard for human rights and the welfare of citizens in the northeast of the country.

Human rights violations during the campaign against Boko Haram are well documented. In 2015, Amnesty International released a report documenting at least 1,200 civilian deaths as a result of extra-judicial killings between 2013 and 2014. The report notes these killings occurred across 27 incidents. One of these incidents resulted in the deaths of 640 men and boys, most of whom had escaped from the Giwa barracks in Maiduguri during a Boko Haram raid. The report also tallies the deaths of at least 7,000 men and boys in military-run detention centers due to “starvation, extreme overcrowding and denial of medical assistance.”³⁹ What is more, by 2015 as many as 20,000 civilians had been arrested arbitrarily.

Military abuses were not confined to the early years of the counterinsurgency. In December, 2022, Reuters released a report documenting a sustained, forced abortion program. As many as 10,000 women rescued from Boko Haram areas underwent abortions. Most did not consent, were unaware of the abortion, or were forcibly held down during the procedures.⁴⁰ The report documents forced abortions as late as 2019, years after the international community began to criticize Nigeria for its treatment of civilians. Shortly after this report, Reuters released another documenting the targeted killing of at least 6,000 boys by the Nigerian military. In one harrowing incident, soldiers smothered a pair of four-month-old twins in front of their mother. During another incident, taking place as late as 2020, soldiers executed as many as thirty children during a round-up in Kukawa. These killings were less formal than the secret abortion program. Interviews with soldiers who witnessed the killings revealed that during some operations against villages suspected of harboring Boko Haram fighters, their unspoken orders were to wipe out the village. Officers jokingly referred to these operations as “Operation No Living Things.”⁴¹

38 All numbers here were gather from the Council on Foreign Relations' Nigeria Security Tracker.

39 Amnesty International. "Nigeria: Stars on their Shoulders: Blood on their Hands: War Crimes Committed by the Nigerian Military." June 03, 2015.

40 Carsten, Paul, et al. "The Abortion Assault: Nigerian Military Ran Secret Mass Abortion Programme in War against Boko Haram." Reuters. December 7, 2022.

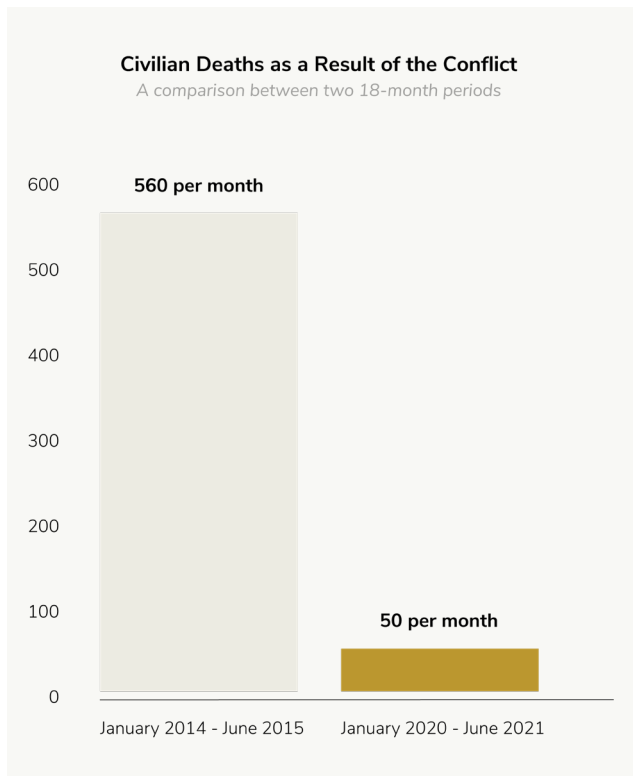
41 Carsten, Paul, et al. "Smothered, Poisoned and Shot: Nigerian Army Massacred Children in its War against Islamist Insurgents, Witnesses Say." Reuters. December 12, 2022.

The reasons for these gross abuses are both institutional and cultural. On the institutional side, the Nigerian armed forces are weak and poorly organized. Soldiers are underpaid and are often sent on rotation for years at a time. Widespread frustration caused mutinies during the early years of the counterinsurgency. Culturally, soldiers tend to view offspring of Boko Haram soldiers as future jihadists. Jihadism is a result of genetics more than indoctrination, in their eyes. Asked about children's deaths, one Nigerian soldier responded "I don't see them as children, I see them as Boko Haram...If I get my hands on them, I won't shoot them, I will slit their throat."⁴²

In addition to these human rights abuses, the Nigerian military has hampered efforts at demobilization, deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR). In a thoughtful report published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Saskia Brechenmacher argues that the military's unforgiving and ham-handed management has helped prevent successful, large-scale efforts at DDRR.⁴³ For example, by monopolizing the screening process for terrorism suspects, the military enjoys lack of serious civilian oversight in the process, leading to mass incarcerations of a broad range of northeastern society living in detention centers for years at a time. Such methods, when taken in conjunction with the brutality discussed above, only exacerbate the already daunting challenges associated with deradicalization and reintegration. As American experiences with Abu Ghraib and Camp Bucca in Iraq should demonstrate, forcing innocent civilians to live in overcrowded, underfunded detention centers will only encourage further radicalization among those with mores already sympathetic to the jihadist cause. Furthermore, holding suspects for years, or worse, killing them on the spot, disincentivizes the many fighters involved in the insurgency who do not fight for ideological-

religious reasons from defecting and working with military and police authorities.

ISWAP has understood the value of capitalizing on societal grievances against the Nigerian military and has adjusted its strategy accordingly. Whereas in the 2014-2015 phase of the insurgency, Boko Haram thought it in its interest to target civilians, ISWAP has learned that it can gain greater support among populations under its control by focusing its efforts against Nigerian military personnel. The data tracking violence in the northeast shows this well. Civilian deaths because of the conflict between January 2014 and June 2015 averaged an astonishing 560 per month. In the same 18-month period between 2020 and 2021, however, this deceased to 50 civilian deaths per month. The average monthly deaths of Nigerian security personnel, by contrast, increased from 2014-2015 to 2021 from 37 per month to 46 per month respectively.⁴⁴



42 Carset, Paul, et al. "Smothered, Poisoned and Shot." *Reuters*.

43 Brechenmacher, Saskia. "Stabilizing Northeast Nigeria after Boko Haram."

44 Nigeria Security Tracker.

Boko Haram under Shekau killed more Muslims in Nigeria than it did Nigerian soldiers, believing that any who failed to meet its strict standards did not qualify as a Muslim. ISWAP has been far more forgiving. Instead of spreading fear through terror attacks against Muslim civilians, it has tried to win the hearts and minds of the populations by providing security against the Nigerian military and providing basic goods and services such as micro-loans for the deeply impoverished residents to start businesses. In other words, ISWAP is attempting to win over support

using the means appropriate for legitimate state actors. Meanwhile, the Nigerian military has stuck to its “kinetic” strategy of brutally punishing civilian populations, as the Reuters reports document well. This spells trouble for the leaders in Abuja who want a swift end to the conflict. As any scholar of insurgent warfare know well, support of civilian populations is the surest means of prolonging a conflict.⁴⁵

45 Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare*. 35-56. Even the less-successful “punishment strategies” rely on some level of public support.

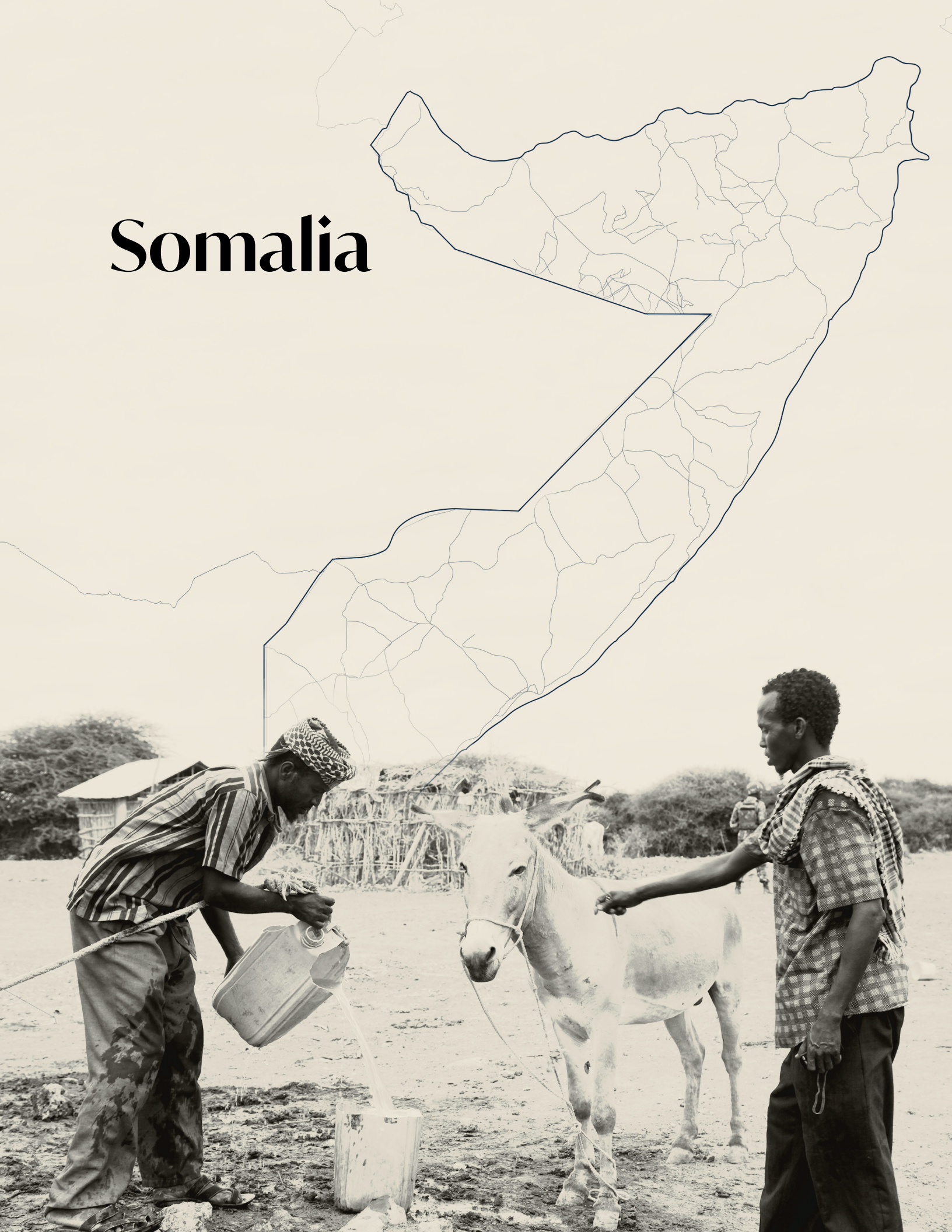
RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States is making a mistake in not only continuing, but dramatically increasing its military aid to Nigeria. While it is promising that Washington still sees Islamic extremism as a serious national security threat, mitigating that threat should draw upon our institutional knowledge when dealing with past, religiously-charged insurgencies in foreign lands. Seeing the Nigerian government hoist itself on its own petard by pursuing a strategy of counterinsurgency that will prolong the conflict should send up red flags. Instead, Washington is squandering its leverage by increasing support. The situation is made all the worse by removing Nigeria from the list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) for religious freedom violations. Increasing military aid and removing the CPC designation renders Washington weak in its ability to influence and manage the conflict against ISWAP.

The recent investigative reports by Reuters and the recent, controversial, elections in Nigeria present a critical juncture where American and Western powers have a renewed opportunity to recalibrate the counterinsurgency strategy in northeast Nigeria. The reports reveal continued and prolonged human rights abuses that have relaunched international efforts to bring Nigerian officials to justice. The elections bring new leaders to Abuja who may be able to break with past approaches to the conflict. In order to capitalize on this moment, the United States should make future military aid contingent on the following actions which collectively aim to shift Nigerian counterinsurgency strategy towards a more population-centric focus.

- 1 First, Abuja must hold accountable to senior military leaders responsible for documented human rights abuses. The 2015 Amnesty report singled out five military leaders for their part in perpetrating crimes against humanity. Nigeria opened an investigation but promptly closed it. Politicians in Abuja should re-open this investigation and demonstrate a good-will effort to abide by the international conventions it has signed onto. Doing so would demonstrate to the Nigerian people, especially those in the northeast who are attracted to jihadist narratives of state injustice, that the country takes seriously its charge to respect human rights. Nigeria must regain control of the narrative in the country: it should be ISWAP, not the Nigerian military, that civilians fear. So long as the reverse holds true, there will be little hope of ending the conflict.
- 2 Second and related to the first, there must be civilian oversight of the military's handling of detainees and suspected terrorists. Treating terror suspects as citizens entitled to fair treatment in the legal system rather than as guilty by suspicion, will further strengthen faith in the government as a power interested in protecting its citizens. More important, by treating citizens fairly and giving them full legal rights, the Nigerian government will be better equipped to make use of citizens who lived under areas of Boko Haram-ISWAP control as intelligence assets.
- 3 Third, the federal government in Abuja should coordinate with the state government in Borno to strengthen efforts at both reintegration and restoration of civil authority and services. Both reintegration of individuals connected with extremist groups as well as those connected with vigilante groups (such as the Civilian Joint Task Force) is necessary for building social cohesion. The governments will have to determine which is the best balance between forgiving those who are repentant and holding accountable those who have directly participated in terror attacks. Successful reintegration is necessary for the restoration of civil authority in areas once under Boko-Haram-ISWAP control. Absent reintegration, any attempt at governing in these areas will be faced with acute problems of illegitimacy.⁴⁶

Somalia



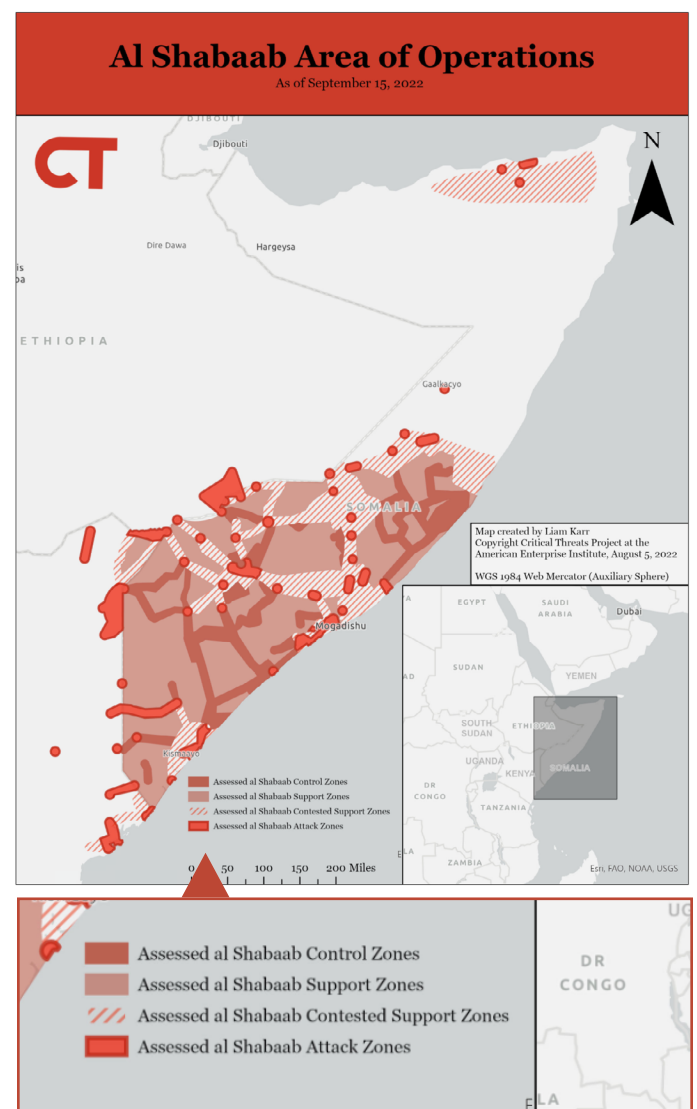
BACKGROUND

General Stephen G. Townsend, commander of African Command (AFRICOM) described Al-Shabaab in 2020 as “the largest and most kinetically active Al-Qaeda network in the world.”¹ His remarks came after the group carried out an attack at a US naval base in Kenya, killing three American security personnel. This attack in particular is worthy of note. After nearly fifteen years of insurgency, Al-Shabaab was able to carry out an attack in a foreign country against the US military. The attack, though small, is a testament to Al-Shabaab’s resilience and resolve after a decade and a half of war.

Al-Shabaab (The Youth), formally Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, has contested roots. Some place its origins in the Al-Ittihad Al-Islamiyya (Islamic Unity, AIAI), a militant Salafi group that emerged in the 1990s. Leading members of Al-Shabaab and AIAI had trained in Afghanistan during the jihad against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Others note that while the group has roots in AIAI, the group as we know it today began in partnership with the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a coalition of Sharia courts that virtually controlled the southern regions of Somalia in the early 2000s. As the militant wing of ICU, Al-Shabaab worked with the ICU to take over the capital, Mogadishu, in 2006. The ICU’s rhetoric of restoring a “Greater Somalia” triggered Ethiopian intervention, invited by the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The Ethiopian intervention quickly removed Al-Shabaab from Mogadishu, but also sparked the civil war that remains active today.

Since the start of the civil war, Al-Shabaab has shifted from controlling large swaths of territory and urban centers in Somalia’s south to operating largely as an adaptive guerilla force outside of urban areas. While the group’s

“golden age” of land control ended in 2010,² the group has regularly sustained group cohesion, conducted military attacks against Somali and foreign security forces, carried out massive terror attacks in multiple countries, and regrouped leadership transitions. For example, after Al-Shabaab had been pushed from all of the major urban areas it previously controlled, it was still



<https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-shabaabs-area-of-operations>

1 Gen. Townsend, Stephen J. “Statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee.” January 30, 2020.

2 Hansen, Stig Jarle. *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group*. Oxford University Press. 2016. Pg. 73 to 103.

able to launch major terrorist attacks in Somalia and Kenya. In 2013, for example, the group executed a multi-day siege of a shopping mall in Nairobi, killing sixty-seven people. In 2015, it again struck in Kenya, killing 148 and holding over 700 hostage at Garissa University College. In 2017 it conducted its deadliest terror strike with a pair of suicide truck bombings in Mogadishu, killing over 500.³

Today, the conflict against Al-Shabaab shows no signs of abating. In fact, trends suggest that Al-Shabaab is in a strong position to increase its influence. In 2022, the group executed an offensive into Ethiopia to take advantage of the country's own civil war. It gathers an estimated \$100 million a year through various sources and maintains a force estimated to be between 7,000 and 12,000 fighters.⁴ What is more, the group is again active in the central and northern portions of the country and is able to infiltrate cities under government control, extorting business owners.⁵ Finally, the ATMIS force, formerly AMISOM (African Mission in Somalia), plans to withdraw its large troop presence from Somalia by the end of 2024. Given the weakness of the Somali government's forces, there are legitimate fears that Al-Shabaab could pull off in Somalia what the Taliban did in Afghanistan.

There are obvious differences between Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram-ISWAP and the government responses. For example, despite international aid, Nigeria has spearheaded the bulk of the campaigns against its insurgency. Somalia, by contrast, has relied heavily on regional powers. Nigeria, too, was far more brutal in its response than the AMISOM forces in Somalia. Despite these differences, we see more in common between the two cases. In both countries, the insurgent groups have bolstered legitimacy by providing basic services

to civilians. State responses have been overly focused on military, tactical victories. And both states have been hampered by poor coordination between central and regional governments and corruption.

IDEOLOGY OF AL-SHABAAB

Part of Al-Shabaab's success is due to its ability to maintain group cohesion through ideological motivation. Like Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Shabaab's animating ideology is Salafi-Jihadism whose globalist orientation it must balance with some of the group's more localized motivations and concerns.

Many of Al-Shabaab's leaders over the past fifteen years fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s where they encountered the teachings of Abdallah Azzam and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Whereas most foreign fighters who first travelled to Afghanistan understood themselves to be participating in "defensive jihad" to protect Muslim lands from foreign invaders, many became radicalized in the *takfiri* teachings that would define Al-Qaeda.⁶ In 2012, Al-Shabaab proclaimed *ba'ya* (allegiance) to al-Qaeda, solidifying an already understood relationship. Equipped with Al-Qaeda's Salafi-jihadist ideology, Al-Shabaab considers apostates any Muslim who seeks to subvert sharia law to man-made laws. Accordingly, the group considers the Somali Federal Government (SFG) an apostate regime and, in speech, refuses to work with government powers. The harsh rhetoric alleging apostasy (a crime punishable by death in traditional Islam) has proven a difficult barrier to persuading the Somali government to embark on peace talks with Al-Shabaab.⁷

Al-Shabaab's Al-Qaeda ideology aims at a pan-Islamic caliphate uniting all Muslim lands under a single political entity governed by sharia.

3 Klobucista, Claire, et al. "Al-Shabaab: Backgrounder." Council on Foreign Relations. December 6, 2022.

4 Hanse, Stig Jarle. *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*. 47.

5 International Crisis Group. "Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia." June 21, 2022.

6 Hansen, Stig Jarle. *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*. 2.

7 International Crisis Group. "Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab."

Such an ambition has given rise to two distinct strategies among Salafi-Jihadists dating back to the 1980s. Abdallah Azzam, a Jordanian jurist who organized the Afghan Arabs with the help of Osama bin Laden, argued that jihadists should organize and concentrate their power in Muslim countries, focusing the fight on secular rulers.⁸ Others like Ayman al-Zawahiri (and later, bin Laden), believed any attempt to erect a true caliphate in Muslim lands would quickly fail unless the powers that support secular rulers are first dealt with. Al-Shabaab, by being embattled within Somalia and fighting both the Somali government (which remains in its genesis) and the regional powers that support the regime must deal with both the “near-enemy” and the “far-enemy” simultaneously. Accordingly, its attacks in Kenya and Uganda can be seen as at once strategic and ideological.

But Al-Shabaab is not simply an Al-Qaeda stepchild in the same way that Boko Haram or ISWAP are not simply ISIS come to West Africa. The group, while certainly motivated by Salafi-Jihadism, also emerged in a local, Somali atmosphere with local, Somali interests and grievances. For example, the group has at times espoused “Greater Somalia” rhetoric, seeking to politically unite all Somalis under a single state. Such an ambition has little relationship with Salafi-jihadist goals. What is more, Al-Shabaab’s members and leadership, despite their pan-Islamic ties and motivations, also make strategic decisions and alliances with Somalia’s various tribal groups. Long-standing tribal affiliations are difficult to sweep away, however ambitious religious ideology may be in transcending local identities.

The allure of Al-Shabaab’s jihadist narrative, however, resonates perhaps more than it would have otherwise due to the fact that the regional

coalitional force combatting Al-Shabaab consists of countries that are majority Christian while Somalia is exclusively Muslim. Al-Shabaab has taken advantage of this fact. Already inclined to paint perceived enemies as “infidels,” Al-Shabaab has painted the AMISOM force as a “Western puppet...fighting a war against Islam.”⁹ In like manner the group has referred to AMISOM as “crusaders.” The group once shared a photo of a killed French commando whose corpse wore a gold cross around his neck captioned “a return of the crusaders.”¹⁰ While most Somalis hold to Sufi views that are much more permissive than the rigid laws of Salafists, Muslims generally are sensitive to charges of crusading invasions of Muslim lands.¹¹ As mentioned previously, many Muslims who volunteered for the Afghanistan jihad against the Soviets were not ultra-conservative Salafists but were only radicalized later.¹² Nonetheless, this rhetoric and religious make-up of the coalitional force has reinforced cultural stigmas against Christians, making Somalia virtually uninhabitable for the faith. Accordingly, Al-Shabaab enjoyed a boost in recruitment following the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006.

COUNTERINSURGENCY IN SOMALIA: REGIONAL RESPONSE AND GOVERNING SHORTFALLS

As with COIN in Nigeria, the fight against Al-Shabaab has been waged by a mix of local, regional, and international actors. At the regional level, six African countries have led the effort to dislodge Al-Shabaab to limited success. With military superiority, heavy funding, and American airpower and special forces, the regional coalition (AMISOM) has proven to be militarily effective. But, as with Boko Haram in Nigeria, this tactical success was never

8 Hegghammer, Thomas. *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*. Cambridge University Press. 2020. 412-422.

9 Turbiville, Graham, et al. *Countering the Al-Shabaab Insurgency in Somalia: Lessons for U.S. Special Operations Forces*. Joint Special Operations University. 2014. Pg. 79.

10 Turbiville, Graham, et al. *Countering the Al-Shabaab Insurgency*. 79.

11 Turbiville, Graham, et al. *Countering the Al-Shabaab Insurgency*. 80.

12 Nilsson, Marco. “Motivations for Jihad and Cognitive Dissonance: A Qualitative Analysis of Former Swedish Jihadists.” *Conflicts and Terrorism*. 2022. 97.

consolidated by strategic, long-term planning to consolidate victory. This is due in part to coordination issues among AMISOM countries who often pursue their own interests under the banner of cooperation. But the more serious issue preventing success is with the internal politics of Somalia. The failure of cooperation among the Somali Federal Government (SFG) and the Federal Member States of Somalia (FMS) has left the military strategy rudder-less, allowing Al-Shabaab to regroup and capitalize on local frustrations. In short, poor governance and lack of legitimacy have paved the way for Al-Shabaab's resurgence.

In 2007, the UN Security Council authorized the African Union's African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) to replace the Ethiopian troops in Somalia. Six African countries contribute to AMISOM forces: Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Djibouti, Burundi, and Nigeria. At its height, AMISOM commanded around 22,000 troops in Somalia and was responsible for an area in southern and central Somalia roughly the size of Iraq.¹³ It remains "the largest deployment of uniformed peacekeepers in the world."¹⁴

This regional effort, however, is held up by extensive international support, much like the counterinsurgency effort in Nigeria. As one author puts succinctly, "the [AMISOM] model required the AU to supply troops; the European Union (EU) to pay their allowances (and other forms of support); the United Nations (UN) to provide logistics support and equipment of reimbursements; and key bilateral partners, notably the United States and the United Kingdom, to provide equipment, training, and other forms of security assistance."¹⁵ In other words, we see many of the basic workings of the same counterinsurgency model in Somalia as we do in Nigeria.

AMISOM has experienced limited success despite facing a host of complex challenges. It protected the Somali TFG (Transitional Federal Government), ensuring the latter's survival after the bloody battle of Mogadishu in 2010 and 2011.¹⁶ Similarly, in expanding its efforts outside of Mogadishu, the force made accessible previously blocked off areas of Somalia for humanitarian relief efforts. What is more, with the help of American "light footprint" counterterrorism operations and air support, AMISOM was able to wrestle most urban areas away from Al-Shabaab control, including the capital Mogadishu in 2011, the strategic port city Kismayo in 2012, and the coastal city Barawe in 2014. What is more, in the same timeframe, the force was able to capture dozens of towns and villages across the southern region. This, in-turn, forced Al-Shabaab to shift from an insurgency with conventional operations into a rural, guerilla force.

Despite these notable victories, we see little actual progress in ending the insurgency. Most experts agree that the conflict has been in a virtual stalemate for the past seven years. Al-Shabaab, despite losing important revenue streams and thousands of fighters, has nonetheless been able to continue terror attacks across the region, expand operations into the north and central regions of Somalia, infiltrate urban areas under government control, and even maintain sources within the Somali government. In fact, despite a record of military setbacks, Al-Shabaab is poised to have a Taliban-style comeback story.

Al-Shabaab's success is due primarily to the ineptitude of the Somali government to effectively coordinate with regional member states and tribal leaders. Locked in petty squabbles, the SFG and Federal member States (FMS) have never been able to move beyond

13 Williams, Paul D. "Subduing Al-Shabaab: The Somalia Model of Counterterrorism and its Limits." *The Washington Quarterly*. 2018. 98

14 Williams, Paul D. "Subduing Al-Shabaab." 96

15 Williams, Paul D. "Subduing Al-Shabaab." 96

16 Williams, Paul D. "Subduing Al-Shabaab." 102

military action against Al-Shabaab, never addressing some of the more root causes of the insurgency. Failing to coordinate a stabilization, governing strategy, Al-Shabaab has been able to present itself as a legitimate alternative to the federal government.¹⁷ In fact, Al-Shabaab's ability to provide basic services eclipses that of the governing authorities who are seen as incompetent and corrupt. So desperate for peace and basic protection, average Somalis are willing to look past Al-Shabaab's austere demands and high taxes.

Proof of the conflict between the SFG and FMS can be seen in Somali troop deployment. In the beginning of AMISOM's mission, planners operated under the assumption that Somalia would be able to deploy some 15,000 troops to conduct joint operations with AMISOM forces. Not only did this number never materialize, but the troops that Somalia did eventually deploy were tribal forces, subject to the political machinations of local power players.¹⁸ On the political side, the formal distribution of power between the central and state Somali powers has yet to be determined.

THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES

The United States has limited interests in Somalia, focused on containing Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab and preventing the country from becoming a safe haven for transnational terrorism.¹⁹ In pursuit of these interests, the U.S. has had a more heavy-handed role in Somalia than it has had in Nigeria, conducting counterterrorism operations, maintaining military advisors, and deploying special forces

to help train Somali troops. As with Nigeria, the American response, however, has been non-linear, rapidly changing even within single administrations. America's inconsistent role in the country surely did not help force Somali politicians to organize themselves, but it remains sufficiently integral to force Somali hands.

Since the "Black Hawk Down" incident in 1993 that left 17 American security personnel killed, policymakers in Washington have wanted to be more cautious in Somalia. Accordingly, while the Ethiopian invasion in 2006 enjoyed American support, the United States was not an active player on the ground. But as the Al-Shabaab insurgency became stronger, policymakers felt the need to play a more forceful role. In 2008, the U.S. designated Al-Shabaab as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). It subsequently began increasing military assistance to AMISOM, usually in funds and training.²⁰

American involvement escalated under the Obama administration. In his second term, President Obama eased restrictions for conducting airstrikes by labelling Al-Shabaab an "associate force" of Al-Qaeda. This allowed more lethal engagement against the group as opposed to those connected with Al-Qaeda's core.²¹ The Trump administration increased the momentum by designating parts of Somalia "area[s] of active hostility" further loosening restrictions on targeting Al-Shabaab.²² Under Trump, American troop presence in Somalia increased to 700 and the number of airstrikes increased from 63 under Obama to 281.²³ By 2020, the United States had invested roughly \$2 billion in security assistance to AMISOM's contributing countries.²⁴ Despite the increase in assistance, the Trump administration evidently

17 This was catalyzed also by the local population's perception of AMISOM. While AMISOM is not guilty of the sorts of heinous activity that the Nigerian Armed Forces committed, the coalition struggled to gain legitimacy in Somalia. Not only were these forces foreign, hailing from Christian countries, but they also caused harm to civilians on occasion and were accused of corruption. Williams, 103.

18 Williams, Paul D. "Subduing Al-Shabaab." 104.

19 Williams, Paul D. "Understanding US Policy in Somalia: Current Challenges and Future Options." Chatham House. July, 2020.

20 Hathaway, Oona A. and Luke Hartig, "Still at War: The United States in Somalia." Just Security. March 31, 2021.

21 Hathaway and Hartig. 2021.

22 Williams. Chatham House. Hathaway and Hartig.

23 CFR. "Al-Shabaab."

24 Williams. Chatham House. 12.

decided the policy new hands-on strategy in Somalia wasn't working. In the final days of his administration, he ordered the withdraw of all American troops.²⁵ Just eighteen months later, President Biden reversed the decision.²⁶

America's at times robust, at time schizophrenic, approach to Somalia has done little to quell the insurgency. Some argue that

American efforts have helped transform Somalia from a "failed" to "fragile" state.²⁷ But this transition is mostly illusory. Somalia as a formal state remains what it was fifteen years ago: largely ephemeral, torn apart by petty political and tribal blocs, and facing down a jihadist insurgency it cannot manage.

²⁵ Cooper, Helene. "Trump Orders All American Troops out of Somalia." *New York Times*.

²⁶ Savage, Charlie and Eric Schmitt. "Biden Approves Plan to Redeploy Several Hundred Ground Forces into Somalia." *The New York Times*.

²⁷ Williams. Chatham House.

RECOMMENDATIONS

But, just as in Nigeria, American military aid remains essential for governing forces who wish to end the conflict with the jihadists. The United States should neither seek a hasty exit from a country in which it still has strategic interest, nor should it continue its current path of easy assistance to the Somali government. In order to help conclude the conflict, the policymakers in Washington should make future military aid contingent on the following.

- 1 First, and as others have pointed out, an agreement must be reached between the FGS and the FMS. The political infighting between the federal government and the member states has handicapped an effective, strategic response to the Al-Shabaab insurgency. Should the infighting continue between the two until AMISOM fully withdraws its troops, the Somali government will not be able to contain, let alone defeat Al-Shabaab.
- 2 Second, the Somali government in conjunction with AMISOM must design a program for handling and reintegrating defectors from Al-Shabaab and low-risk members. Al-Shabaab, like any organization, consists of radicals and pragmatists. In this case, it is made up of those genuinely seeking to resurrect an Islamic caliphate rid Somalia of Western influence, and those who wish for greater stability that they may live with a bit of normalcy. Exploiting these differences should be a top priority and can be addressed by welcoming defectors, thereby incentivizing future defections from the group. As Nigeria's experience will suggest, such programs are difficult to manage. But if done effectively, they could help win over factions in Al-Shabaab who care little for caliphates and should be on the side of moderation.
- 3 In addition to these actions that must be taken by Somali actors, U.S. policymakers should reduce their reliance on airstrikes and military force to target Al-Shabaab leaders and fighters. Unless the U.S. government were to invest heavily in a massive campaign to dislodge Al-Shabaab permanently (an unlikely and even more disastrous scenario), its light footprint approach will do little to change the Somali chess board and may even prolong the conflict. Instead, aid should be spent to invest in good governance, for programs to aid the Somali government to rebuild areas previously under Al-Shabaab's control and influence. Successful development in such areas will demonstrate that the Somali government can fill the void better than Al-Shabaab which promises security and services at the cost of a draconian ideology and extortion.²⁸ Military pressure has not dampened Al-Shabaab's spirit or ability to conduct attacks but may have even strengthened resolve by playing into Al-Shabaab's anti-Crusader narrative.

Conclusion

The counterinsurgency responses in Nigeria and Somalia suggest an uphill battle in African countries where jihadist insurgents have already carved out land holdings and embedded themselves in local populations. In such scenarios, military action is necessary but insufficient. States and regional actors have opted to focus on tactical military victory without plans for translating these victories into strategic success. If there is one lesson to be gleaned from the studies of Nigeria and Somalia it is that bullets and bombs do not defeat ideologies. Should the United States decide to take an active role in managing the crisis of jihadist insurgencies in Africa, it should learn from its experiences in Nigeria and Somalia and choose partners who are serious about addressing the grievances that fuel conflict, not those who cease planning once plenty of bombs have been dropped.

That successful counterinsurgencies require sustained local efforts to rebuild, provide basic services, and reintegrate former and low-threat insurgents into the population is not a new insight. But this makes the cases of Nigeria and Somalia all the more remarkable: despite having

waged counterinsurgency campaigns in recent memory that suffered similar flaws, the United States has continued to support states that show little interest in strategic thinking.

There is perhaps an even more important lesson to be gleaned from the cases of Nigeria and Somalia. Upon hearing the alarm bells of jihadist activity, the United States is tempted to intervene, often militarily, to hunt and put down the monster. Over twenty years after the start of the “War on Terror,” and after a decade and a half of supporting counterinsurgencies in Africa, we in the United States must ask whether these alarm bells are not better understood as siren recommendations in this report will not end the jihadist rage in Nigeria, let alone Somalia. Institutional tinkering and personnel adjustments may mitigate the threats and accordingly should be carried out. But, given that the success of our support depends so heavily on the prudent cooperation of indigenous governments, prudence and cooperation that seems so elusive, American policymakers must ask themselves whether interference in future and current insurgencies is desirable at all.





MAX J. PROWANT

PHILOS PROJECT FELLOW, IDC

Max Prowant is a Philos Project Research Fellow at In Defense of Christians. His work focuses on currents in Islamic extremism and its effect on Christian communities in the Near East. Specifically he both studies the radical, religious ideologies motivating jihadist organizations and tracks the developments of these groups. Max is a Ph.D. Candidate in Government at the University of Texas at Austin where he studies Sunni and Shia conceptions of jihad in the modern age. While at UT Austin, Max also conducted extensive study of classical political philosophy and Arabic. Originally from Kentucky, Max completed his Bachelors of Arts with Honors at Morehead State University in government and Spanish.