Viewpoint

THE ISLAMIC STATE WEST AFRICA PROVINCE (ISWAP): ANALYSING THE GROWING TERRORIST THREAT IN THE SAHEL REGION

There has been a recent surge of terrorist activities in the West African Region, and the prominent threat emerges from the Islamic State and its affiliates, such as the Islamic State West Africa Province. Reports from international organisations and the Global Terrorism Index have highlighted a significant shift in the global epicentre of terrorism, transitioning from the West Asian region to Africa. This study examines the rising influence and threat posed by the Islamic State in West Africa while addressing its broader implications for the African continent. It analyses the group's operational strategies, including propaganda and mechanisms for terror financing. Furthermore, the paper explores the geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics that have facilitated the Islamic State's expansion and consolidation of power in the region.

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Introduction

On 20 November 2024, Turkish News Channel Andalou Agency reported an attack by ISWAP militants on a military installation in the remote town of Kareto in the Mobbar Local Government Area in the Borno State in Nigeria in the 19 November 2024.[1] This is the latest attempt by the Islamic State West Africa Province in the African continent to carve influence in the region. However, terrorism is not a new challenge in West Africa; it remains deeply entrenched in the internal security dynamics of many states, particularly those facing persistent instability. Terror groups have taken up arms in arenas of constant political instability and economic hardships, thus trying to frame an alternative to the population which could be susceptible to radicalisation. This trend has become increasingly evident in recent years, with the Islamic State and its affiliates gaining traction across the region.

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The Islamic State and West Africa

The Islamic State is a Salafi jihadist organisation established in Iraq and Syria with the primary objective of establishing an Islamic Caliphate globally. However, its presence is not limited to these two countries, as various affiliates have emerged and established themselves worldwide. In Africa, various affiliate of the group has their pockets of influence, including. the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Islamic State Sahel Province, Islamic State Mozambique, and Islamic State Somalia. The African continent comparatively hosts a larger presence of Islamic State groups mainly due to its vast geographical expanse and the political instability and insecurity prevalent in certain regions. Another reason for the change of the Islamic State towards Africa has been that since 2019, the group has shifted its focus and ramped up operations in the African continent due to political, economic and security turmoil in the region. The rising political instability has also affected the rise of terror incidents in the region. The expansion of the group towards West Africa has been alarming, particularly with the ISWAP and its independent sub-group, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

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Background

The Islamic State of West Africa Province, which has been the main focus of most of the counter-terror groups, has been significantly involved in the terror activities in the region. The group came into being in 2015 under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, who was the leader of Boko Haram after the group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. This all changed in 2016 with a split within the group. Since its split from Boko Haram in 2016, which came out due to differences in the leadership, with the Boko Haram leadership continuing to be under the support of the Abubarku Shekau, the Islamic State in the Levant instead chose to support one of its principal commanders in Abu Musab al-Barnawi who then was considered to be the leader of ISWAP, with Shekau declaring himself the leader of the Boko Haram.[2] The leaders have since been killed in action, and the ISWAP has replaced its leaders in recent times. While both groups have strong affiliations with the Islamic State, there is a conflict of interest, thus creating a schism. The turf war has significantly increased regional instability and led to further complexities for peace. After its split, the group focused on its recruitment drives and added members to continue.

The group, which has focused on recruitment from radicalised elements through various modes of propaganda, focuses on recruiting members from North Eastern Nigeria and its neighbouring regions, primarily based on the conflict-impacted territories. The group is said to have approximately 5000 fighters,[3] thus ensuring it has a strong support base and fighter base for its terror activities. One of the unique recruitment drives amongst the terror groups in the region is that the group takes advantage of the economic issues, and the political and security turmoil riled up in its sphere of functioning and attracts youths who are disdained by such situations.

Hearts and Mind Strategy

The ISWP group has focused on protecting citizens affected by the Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, popularly known as the Boko Haram. It has also provided social services and economic prospects for members,[4] famously known as the "Hearts and Mind Strategy coined by Bernard Fall in his idea of competitive control but this term was first used by Field Marshall Gerald Templer in 1968". The group is said to assist in digging up wells, giving out seeds and fertilisers, creating safe pastures for herders, using clerics to encourage internally displaced people to return to their communities, and ensuring that it does not target civilians. This has painted the group in a positive light with the local populace since Nigeria is devastated by conflict, poverty, shrinking rivers and expanding desertification with little government intervention.[5] This has ensured support for the terror group over the local authorities, as well.

This has made the group gain prominence in the region and ensured it overtook Boko Haram as the dominant group. The group has used this tactic to differentiate itself from Boko Haram and the Nigerian state, thus creating an alternative to the state as well as acting as a non-state actor alternative to radicalised elements. The group has attempted to build positive relationships with society, given how Boko Haram and even, to a certain extent, the Nigerian state has portrayed a negative image mainly through various violent means. This can be seen as the ISWAP providing a carrot while the Boko Haram and the authorities a stick.

Given Boko Haram's violent history with the local populace, the initiative from the ISWAP has ensured that the group has gained traction amongst radicalised individuals, as they not only provide economic and social security but, more importantly, protection. As part of their attempts to differentiate themselves from Boko Haram, the group ensured that no civilians would be harmed across its line of influence, thus ensuring their mirage of safety. This was an important initiative in part of their overall propaganda of the group's attempts at radicalising individuals and gaining favouritism amongst the local populace.

In recent times, however, there has been a decline in the strategy with the local populace. After earning a significant influence among the local populace, the group shifted their approach from the heart and mind policy to aggression. Those who were thought to be protected by the group have been under attack, and this veil of security has been removed. Recently, the group has resorted to attacking and abducting local populations, including three abductions and nine executions by June 2024 and in May 2024, the group attacked Baga town of Kukawa in the Northeastern Nigerian state of Bono and killed 15 people.[6] Therefore, the group has ensured that the Heart and Mind strategy has been used to gain legitimacy amongst the locals. Still, at the same time and thus once gaining prominence and popularity, including hefty support amongst the local populace, the group has taken violent methods similar to Boko Haram. The group has not just limited itself to this strategy as part of its propaganda initiatives; it functions similarly to other affiliates of the Islamic State.

Islamic State Propaganda in West Africa

The Islamic State, across the global arena, has ensured that there has been some strong connection among the radicalised youth through its propaganda machinery—the use of various magazine outlets, translations and social media platforms, including Telegram and TikTok. Similar tactics are being used in the West African region. In the region, the terrorists have taken up initiatives to use cyberspace. The group uses it to garner information and act as a virtual training ground, help boost morale and networking, and drive fundraising efforts.[7] The groups have used propaganda to exploit the disgruntled individuals affected by the various instabilities in the region. They have used languages through various translation platforms, including the French language, to connect with the local populace. This systematic use of propaganda has been a strong suit of the terror group, using it in various other territories to spread its messages.

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The ISWAP, in particular, has used propaganda to advance its agenda. In recent times, the straightforward use of propaganda to advance its ideology and agenda is one that security and intelligence forces must monitor and analyse to avoid long-term implications.[8]

While the propaganda machinery has been working steadfastly to gain some traction and increase the group's influence and membership across the region, terror financing has been the other initiative taken by the group, which has been an essential part of its functioning.

Terror Financing in West Africa

When it was first established, the Islamic State's focus on financing its activities was based on the resources available in its territorial gambit, including kidnappings and extortion. With the loss of influence, financial stability has been lost. Therefore, the group has begun looking for alternative terror financing models. The terror financing schemes are more prevalent in the African villages of the Islamic State, with some of the affiliates cross-funding each other. The Somalia-based Islamic State had supported and funded some activities of the Democratic Republic of Congo Islamic State affiliate. The groups raise money through various criminal activities split between ISIS- Somalia, DRC, Mozambique and the Central ISIS Command.[9] These terror financing avenues are not just limited to West Africa but have stemmed into the enormous African

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Other alternatives used by such groups have been using social media and applications like Tinder to raise funds for the organisation. This initiative was conducted in South Africa through various cells, such as the Durban, Cape Town, and Johannesburg cells[10]. Thus, this has helped fund the Islamic State, both the Central Command and the affiliates, but this has also ensured that the various African-based affiliates have gained some prominence and status amongst the various terror affiliates of the group.

The group's resurgence around the Lake Chad basin and its accessibility to regions, including Nigeria, show that the terror group's outreach could have a long-term negative impact on the region and the continent overall. The group, which came out as a splinter cell of Boko Haram, has, over time, gained influence over north-eastern Nigeria and the different regions around it. With a more extensive member base than the other terror groups, the ISWAP has ensured dominance in the region.

Regional and International Reactions

The region and the leadership within Western Africa have shown concern and stressed the importance of tackling the issue of the ISWAP presence in the region. The Nigerian leadership and military have attempted to counter the group's rise and reduced the group's advancement in the region, particularly within the state. There is a need for a more significant regional collaboration to counter the threat, including more effective efforts through various initiatives, such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), with the other Lake Chad Basin nations. Though respective governments' attempts have been made to reduce the threat and improve security, the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) in 2024 has stressed that lack of cooperation and coordination amongst the governments can be a long-term cause of concern and this could hamper the efforts to reduce the rise of the ISWAP. With conflicts between states and civilians continuing in the region, the states need to focus on rebuilding trust and support for the local population. Regaining trust could help reduce ISWAP attempts to gain traction amongst the local population.

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The region's increasing political and military instability could impact efforts to counter the group. Shifting political ideologies and leadership in countries like Mali could create shifts in the ideas for countering the group. These could create further complications as differences begin to seep into the region. The reactions are not just limited to the state and the region but internationally also there has been expressions of concerns and attempts have been made to find a solution to the ISWAP threat.

One prominent nation with a strong influence in the region has been France. France has always stressed its full commitment to supporting peace and security in the Sahel region, including providing troops. In the past, this included support from the European Union and significant initiatives such as the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S).[11] The French have, however, seen a reduction in their influence in recent times, with various coups in French-supported nations losing out on their pro-French leaderships. This has caused a vacuum which could either be taken up by other nations such as Russia or even non-state actors like ISWAP. The Russians, have been acting through various outlets, including the Wagner Group, which has been established to bring about regime change and thus led to confrontation with the ISWAP militants. The Russians have sought to gain influence in the region, and it is through various regime stability initiatives that they seek to find such influence. The Russians, therefore, would be attempting to act as an option for long-term cooperation, particularly with the new anti-West leaders, to ensure stability, including fighting back with the ISWAP. The Russians could provide long-term security and long-term counter-terrorism cooperation.

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Conclusion

As the entire global arena experiences constant instability and flux, this period has provided a space for various non-state actors to involve themselves and revive their lost space to a certain extent. The same can be seen in Africa; with a shift of the traditional allies and alliances becoming loose and the grip of regional and extra-regional powers reducing, there has been either a space for new powers or non-state actors to involve themselves. This is where groups like the Islamic State come in; the African continent and the West Africa and Sahel region have become the hotbeds of global terrorism in recent times.

The group has established a sense of influence, encouraging their attempts at establishing and gaining traction in the region. The African chessboard of constant political and leadership changes has encouraged such groups to further enhance their outreach in such conflicting times. The economic crisis also adds to it; thus, such groups can gain from such situations and further stamp their influence. The rise of terrorism in the Sahel region, in particular, could be seen as a long-term destabilising factor. Thus, the focus in the long term could be shifted towards the Sahel region.

With data suggesting that West Africa and the Sahel Region are the countries most affected by terrorism in the year 2024, this rise can be seen as a concern. In the long term, the region is seen as the hotbed of terrorism, shifting focus from the traditional concept of West Asia being the main focus. Al Qaeda and particularly the Islamic State can, in the long term, lead the region into further chaos through various methods, including terror financing and propaganda, which could have a long-term impact on the region.

Lastly, the turf wars could impact the rising terrorism in the region. The increasing competition between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State could cause friction between the two groups. The attempt at a revival of Al-Qaeda could see further conflict between the two groups, which could create a period of caution for the region but also could lead to finding a long-term solution if both groups' constant conflict could lead to a long-term solution through their elimination.

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