BRIEF REPORT
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN INFORMATION (COI)

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Violent Extremism in West Africa

Ministry of Immigration and Integration

The Danish Immigration Service

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Abbreviations

AQ	al-Qaeda
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
COI	Country of Origin Information
CTC at West Point	Combating Terrorism Center at West Point
ICCT	International Centre for Counter-Terrorism
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JNIM/GSIM	Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen/Groupe de Soutien à l'Islam et aux Musulmans [Eng.: The Group in support of Islam and Muslims]
MNLA	Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad [Eng.: Azawad National Liberation Movement]
Stanford CISAC	Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation

Introduction, Methodology and Disclaimer

This brief COI report explains the spread of violent extremist groups[1] in West Africa and outlines some of the drivers behind the increasing influence in the region and describes three larger groups that are present in the region – namely the al-Qaeda (hereafter AQ) affiliated group JNIM, and the two Islamic State (hereafter IS) affiliated groups ISWAP and ISGS. The report is completed with an outline of the groups' geographical presence.

The report at hand is part of a series about IS where the following reports have been published until now: IS state building (December 2019, in Danish), IS in Iraq (December 2019, in Danish), and IS in Syria (June 2020, in English). Due to the variety of violent extremist actors in Africa and the interplay with local dynamics, the scope of this report has been widened to include several extremist groups in the region of West Africa.

The report is a desk study based on open sources and was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology.[2] The sources include, among others, research institutes, counter-terrorism centres, think tanks, journals, UN agencies, NGOs, and news media. The report is not, and does not purport to be, a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects of the issues addressed in the report and should be weighed against other available country of origin (COI) information about extremism in West Africa.

The report does not include any policy recommendations or analysis. The information in the report does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS). Furthermore, it is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. The terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

The report has been peer reviewed by the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM), Analysis Section, in accordance with the EASO COI Report Methodology. The research and editing of this report was finalised on 23 June 2020.

The report can be accessed from the website of DIS, www.newtodenmark.dk, and is thus available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the general public.

[1] These groups conduct insurgency activities often broadly referred to as jihadism. The Arabic word *Jihad* means "to strive", "to exert", or "to fight", depending on the context (Oxford Dictionary of Islam, *Jihad*, n.d., url). The groups described in this report use the term *Jihad* as justification of their extreme violent activities against non-Muslims or Muslims that do not interpret Islam in accordance with their own belief. The report applies the term violent extremism, commonly used by e.g. the UN.

[2] EASO, *Country of Origin Information (COI), Report Methodology*, June 2019, url

Recent Violent Extremism in West Africa and its Drivers

Recently, an upsurge in activities by violent extremist groups can be tracked across West Africa. According to an analysis conducted by *Africa Center for Strategic Studies* of data gathered by ACLED during 2010-2018, violent events and fatalities committed by militant Islamist groups in the Sahel have doubled each year since 2016. The study shows that prior to 2012, it was only AQIM that was active in the Sahel, namely Mali. Since then, several active extremist groups have emerged.[3] Sources state that the groups have e.g. been active in Niger and Burkina Faso. In Niger in December 2019, IS claimed responsibility for an attack that claimed the lives of more than 70 soldiers.[4] Burkina Faso has been known for being a stable state in a volatile region[5] but has seen an intense rise in attacks since 2015.[6] 4,000 deaths related to terrorist violence were reported in 2019 alone;[7] 1,800 of them were committed in Burkina Faso.[8] From January throughout March 2020, *Insecurity Insight* has collected data from ACLED that points to 85 incidents with 438 associated deaths in Burkina Faso.[9] ACLED data covering Western Africa counts 8,422 fatalities from 1 January 2020 until 23 June 2020.[10] According to sources, Coastal West African countries are now increasingly at risk of attacks from groups at the southern borders of Burkina Faso.[11]

The spread of activities to the region of West Africa is linked to the weakening of AQ and IS in the Middle East[12] and originates from insurgents in Northern Africa.[13] The current prevalence of groups in the region originates from northern Mali where fighters from AQ in Algeria took part in a local rebellion.[14]

It is well documented that the root causes of the success of violent extremism in West Africa are linked to local factors.[15] The region has a tradition for practising the Islamic branch of Sufism which has largely been perceived as a moderate form of Islam by Western states. Nonetheless, the local factors for recruitment

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[3] Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *The Complex and Growing Threat of Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel*, 15 February 2019, url
[4] ICG, *Behind the Jihadist Attack in Niger's Inates*, 13 December 2019, url
[5] EC, *International Cooperation and Development: Burkina Faso*, n.d., url
[6] Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *The Complex and Growing Threat of Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel*, 15 February 2019, url; BBC, *How West Africa is under threat from Islamist militants*, 13 January 2020, url; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *Ansaroul Islam: The Rise and Decline of a Militant Islamist Group in the Sahel*, 29 July 2019, url
[7] ICCT, *The Shifting Sands of the Sahel's Terrorism Landscape*, 12 March 2020, url; UNOWAS, *'Unprecedented terrorist violence' in West Africa, Sahel region*, 8 January 2020, url
[8] ICCT, *The Shifting Sands of the Sahel's Terrorism Landscape*, 12 March 2020, url
[9] Insecurity Insight, *Sahel Monitoring: Violence Against Civilians and Vital Civilian Facilities in Burkina Faso*, April 2020, url
[10] ACLED, *Data Export Tool: Western Africa*, 23 June 2020, url
[11] ICG, *The Risk of Jihadist Contagion in West Africa*, 20 December 2019, url; GIS, opinion by Charles Millon, *Jihadists open a new front in West Africa*, 13 September 2019, url
[12] SWP, *Jihadism in Africa*, June 2015, url, p. 11; CGP, *ISIS in Africa: The Caliphate's Next Frontier, 26 May 2020,* url
[13] SWP, *Jihadism in Africa*, June 2015, url, pp. 11-12; Ibrahim, I. Y., *The Wave of Jihadist Insurgency in West Africa: Global Ideology, Local Context, Individual Motivations*, 2017, url, p. 6
[14] SWP, *Jihadism in Africa*, June 2015, url, p. 12
[15] United Nations Security Council, *Security Council Briefing on the Shared Causes of Intercommunal Violence and Preventing Violent Extremism in West Africa*, 16 December 2019, url, pp. 2-5; Krause, D., *How transnational jihadist groups are exploiting local conflict dynamics in Western Africa*, 10 May 2020, url; SWP, *Jihadism in Africa*, June 2015, url; GIS, opinion by Charles Millon, *Jihadists open a new front in West Africa*, 13 September 2019, url; Ibrahim, I. Y., *The Wave of Jihadist Insurgency in West Africa: Global Ideology, Local Context, Individual Motivations*, 2017, url; TNH, *Understanding the causes of violent extremism in West Africa*, 10 May 2013, url

into Salafi-jihadi ideology have been created through non-religious incentives.[16] These factors exist especially in rural areas where extremist groups are most active – in these areas, the population has often long been neglected by the state, for example in terms of availability of health care, education and security.[17] Furthermore, access to resources such as land and water has become increasingly scarce which is aggravated by climate change and population growth, also puts a strain on the local population.[18]

Extremist groups such as AQ and IS have shown the ability to tap into already existing local conflicts[19] which can for example stem from ethnic tensions or concern the access to resources for herders and farmers.[20] An analysis by *The Cligendael Institute* published in 2015, describes the north-south inequalities and ethnic tensions as some of the main drivers behind the settling of extremist groups such as AQ in northern Mali.[21] A study published by the *Africa Center for Strategic Studies* in August 2018 points to the fact that religion does not play a major role in the tensions between Fulani herder communities and the Bambara or Dogon farmer communities in central Mali. Both Fulani, Bambara and Dogon, have the same Islamic beliefs. Extremist groups in the area have managed to exploit already existing disputes by aligning themselves with Fulani communities, echoing grievances about land tenure systems that give preference to farmer communities.[22]

The current covid19 pandemic offers opportunities for extremist groups to gain support and strength in local communities in the Sahel region. The groups are already providing security and health care in places where the state is otherwise unavailable, and particularly to this region is the fact that groups often gain support through their ability to provide security and income possibilities rather than religious ideology.[23] In March 2020, the IS leadership told its members that their universal war was to continue, even as the covid19 virus spread. Moreover, the leadership encouraged members to take maximum advantage of the increased pressure put on the national and international security regimes that helped keep the group in check.[24]

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[16] Krause, D., *How transnational jihadist groups are exploiting local conflict dynamics in Western Africa*, 10 May 2020, url; Seesemann, R., *Sufism in West Africa*, 2010, url, pp. 607, 612

[17] Krause, D., *How transnational jihadist groups are exploiting local conflict dynamics in Western Africa*, 10 May 2020, url; SWP, *Jihadism in Africa*, June 2015, url, p. 7

[18] Krause, D., *How transnational jihadist groups are exploiting local conflict dynamics in Western Africa*, 10 May 2020, url; ICCT, *The Warning Signs are Flashing Red: The interplay between climate change and violent extremism in the Western Sahel*, September 2019, url

[19] Krause, D., *How transnational jihadist groups are exploiting local conflict dynamics in Western Africa*, 10 May 2020, url; Ibrahim, I. Y., *The Wave of Jihadist Insurgency in West Africa: Global Ideology, Local Context, Individual Motivations*, 2017, url, p. 5

[20] United Nations Security Council, *Security Council Briefing on the Shared Causes of Intercommunal Violence and Preventing Violent Extremism in West Africa*, 16 December 2019, url, pp. 3-4; Krause, D., *How transnational jihadist groups are exploiting local conflict dynamics in Western Africa*, 10 May 2020, url

[21] Cligendael Institute, *The roots of Mali's conflict: Moving beyond the 2012 crisis*, March 2015, url, p. 30

[22] Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *Mitigating Farmer-Herder Violence in Mali*, 8 August 2019, url

[23] ICCT, *The Impact of Coronavirus on Terrorism in the Sahel*, 16 April 2020, url

[24] ICG, *Contending with ISIS in the Time of Coronavirus*, 31 March 2020, url

Outlining Violent Extremist Groups in West Africa

Depicting the landscape of armed conflict in West Africa is difficult due to a number of challenges. Firstly, the conflicts are often overlapping. Secondly, there are numerous armed groups operating in the region, sometimes with different and sometimes with shared goals and territories. Finally, the lines between jihadist and non-jihadist armed actors are often unclear. There are indications of cooperation between ostensibly non-jihadist and jihadist groups, and fighters often pass back and forth between different types of groups. Based on this fluidity, there have been frequent allegations that both pro-government and formerly separatist or non-jihadist armed groups have collaborated with various jihadist groups.[25] In spite of this complexity, various sources outline patterns of the proliferation and modus operandi of a number of extremist groups along with more or less firm size estimates.

Groups affiliated with or with an affinity for IS began to appear in the region in 2015, including the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).[26] In addition, a diverse array of other militant Islamist groups operates in the area. In 2017 a number of jihadist armed actors were brought under the AQ-affiliated umbrella of Jama'a Nusrah al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (Islam and Muslims' Support Group or JNIM) with the motto "one banner, one group, one emir."[27] The majority of violent events in West Africa in recent years have been linked to these groups along with Ansaroul Islam,[28] the first native violent extremist group in Burkina Faso.[29] However, since mid-2019, there has been a dramatic decline in the activities of Ansaroul Islam.[30] As such, this report focuses on JNIM, ISWAP, and ISGS.

While there are tensions between JNIM and IS in West Africa with no evidence of organisational coordination between the two groups, some coordination may have occurred on a personal and local level. Subject matter experts note that IS and al-Qaeda pursue some of the same goals; e.g. ISGS and JNIM agree on expelling Western forces while simultaneously drawing on some of the same ethnic and tribal structures. However, there does not seem to be a tactical or strategical cooperation as such. ISGS and JNIM conduct attacks independently. While JNIM largely focuses on western Mali and northern Burkina Faso, ISGS sticks to eastern Mali, eastern Burkina Faso, and western Niger.[31] Furthermore, there have been recent reports of clashes in for example Burkina Faso where militants from JNIM and ISWAP clashed in early and mid-May 2020, reportedly forcing three ISWAP groups to flee the region towards east, leaving

[25] European Council on Foreign Relations, *Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and Sahel*, May 2019, url
[26] CGP, *ISIS in Africa: The End of the "Sahel Exception"*, 2 June 2020, url; CTC at West Point, *The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent*, August 2018, url, p. 23; CTC at West Point, *The Renewed Jihadi Terror Threat to Mauritania*, August 2018, url, p. 16
[27] CGP, *ISIS in Africa: The End of the "Sahel Exception"*, 2 June 2020, url; EER, *Jihadist Competition and Cooperation in West Africa*, 3 April 2020, url
[28] Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *The Complex and Growing Threat of Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel*, 15 February 2019, url
[29] Stanford CISAC, *Mapping militant organizations – Ansaroul Islam*, last updated July 2018, url
[30] Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *Ansaroul Islam: The Rise and Decline of a Militant Islamist Group in the Sahel*, 29 July 2019, url; TNH, *Jihadis, vigilantes, and demoralised troops: A who's who in Burkina Faso's spiralling crisis*, 9 March 2020, url
[31] CGP, *ISIS in Africa: The End of the "Sahel Exception"*, 2 June 2020, url; EER, *Jihadist Competition and Cooperation in West Africa*, 3 April 2020, url; TNH, *Jihadis, vigilantes, and demoralised troops: A who's who in Burkina Faso's spiralling crisis*, 9 March 2020, url

several middle-ranking ISWAP officers killed.[32] Infighting between extremist groups in the northern part of Mali also took place in the beginning of 2020, continuing throughout May with JNIM reportedly driving out IS-affiliated combatants from most of the northern Gao region and inflicting heavy losses on IS factions in the inner Niger Delta area of the Mopti region.[33] Since early 2019, ISGS attacks have been claimed by ISWAP which according to UN terrorism experts is part of a new narrative to show a unified IS presence in the region.[34]

Al-Qaeda expands to West Africa: AQIM and JNIM

Extremist groups entered Northern Mali from Algeria and established themselves locally between 2003 and 2011.[35] AQIM was formally established out of the group called *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GPSC) in 2006-2007.[36] In the aftermath of the rebellions in northern Mali, the area was demilitarised creating a security vacuum. GSPC, later AQ, managed to act as a substitute state fulfilling the role of social security provider in a place abandoned by the state.[37]

Among others, AQIM cooperated with *Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA)[38] during the rebellion that took place in northern Mali in 2012-2013. The rebellion began in January 2012, and by April, northern Mali declared its independence as the state *Azawad*. Together with Ansar Dine, AQIM took control of Timbuktu.[39] In January 2013, a French military intervention dismantled the rebellion and the groups fled to neighbouring countries or blended in with the local population.[40]

As several groups in 2017 merged into the AQ-affiliated *Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen* (JNIM – also referred to as GSIM[41]), AQ has continued to dominate the region since,.[42] JNIM is led by Iyad Ag Ghali, the former leader of Ansar Dine,[43] and they are primarily active in Mali and Burkina Faso.[44] According to

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[32] ICG, *Crisis Watch: Burkina Faso*, May 2020, url
[33] ICG, *Crisis Watch: Mali*, May 2020, url
[34] United Nations Security Council, *Letter dated 15 July 2019 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council*, 15 July 2019, url, p. 11
[35] SWP, *Jihadism in Africa*, June 2015, url, pp. 70-71
[36] DIIS, *Militante Islamistiske Grupper i Mali: Ideologi, Strategi og Alliancer [Militant Islamic Groups in Mali: Ideology, Strategy and Alliances]*, 2013, url, pp. 15-16
[37] Cligendael Institute, *The roots of Mali's conflict: Moving beyond the 2012 crisis*, March 2015, url, p. 34
[38] The rebellion that took place in northern Mali in 2012-2013 was initially led by MNLA, a group comprised of ex-mercenary Malians returning from Libya after the Gaddafi regime broke down. MNLA was a nationalistic organisation with the aim of independence of northern Mali, creating the state of Azawad. During the rebellion that began in January, MNLA cooperated with Ansar Dine, MUJAO, and AQIM, but in June 2012, MNLA was driven out by the other groups. DIIS, *Militante Islamistiske Grupper i Mali: Ideologi, Strategi og Alliancer [Militant Islamic Groups in Mali: Ideology, Strategy and Alliances]*, 2013, url, pp. 9-10
[39] DIIS, *Militante Islamistiske Grupper i Mali: Ideologi, Strategi og Alliancer [Militant Islamic Groups in Mali: Ideology, Strategy and Alliances]*, 2013, url, pp. 11-12
[40] SWP, *Jihadism in Africa*, June 2015, url, p. 69
[41] *Groupe de Soutien à l'Islam et aux Musulmans* (GSIM)
[42] ICCT, *The Shifting Sands of the Sahel's Terrorism Landscape*, 12 March 2020, url; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *The Complex and Growing Threat of Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel*, 15 February 2019, url; Counter Extremism Project, *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)*, n.d., url
[43] Foreign Brief, *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin: a merger of al-Qaeda affiliates*, 25 April 2020, url; Counter Extremism Project, *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)*, n.d., url
[44] CGP, *ISIS in Africa: The End of the "Sahel Exception"*, 2 June 2020, url

Stanford CISAC, one aim of JNIM is to create a caliphate, and the group, among others things, aspires to expand its presence into larger territories while maintaining close relations to local communities.[45] Some sources estimate that JNIM currently has around 2,000 fighters.[46]

Kidnapping for ransoms has played a significant role in AQ's success in the region.[47] Furthermore, the groups have relied on smuggling of drugs and arms, trafficking in human beings, robberies, and acting as protection rackets.[48] Some activities can be ethnically linked when sources for example report about violent clashes between Fulani JNIM and Bambara communities in central Mali.[49]

According to recent sources, JNIM also relies on sale of stolen livestock, artisanal gold mining, poaching, and taxes for revenue.[50] Regarding recruitment strategies, JNIM depends on close ties with the local population – for example through marriage[51] – and takes advantage of local conflicts between ethnic groups and grievances towards central governments. Furthermore, it is common that recruits join JNIM due to economic incentives rather than religious convictions.[52]

The group remains the primary source of attacks against civilians and military targets in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.[53] JNIM has for instance targeted the Malian army, UN forces, and European presence in the region such as the French counter-terrorism forces.[54] As of March 2020, AQ remains the biggest player in the Sahel due to its regional affiliate JNIM who is responsible for around 65 % of all terrorist-related fatalities in the region.[55]

Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)

ISWAP has its origins in the Nigerian-based, AQ-affiliated organisation Boko Haram,[56] also known by its Arabic name, Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad (JAS), meaning "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad." The group was possibly formed in northeast Nigeria at

[45] Stanford CISAC, *Mapping militant organizations – Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen*, last updated July 2018, url
[46] Foreign Brief, *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin: a merger of al-Qaeda affiliates*, 25 April 2020, url; EER, *Jihadist Competition and Cooperation in West Africa*, 3 April 2020, url
[47] SWP, *Jihadism in Africa*, June 2015, url, pp. 70-71, 75; Stanford CISAC, *Mapping militant organizations – Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen*, last updated July 2018, url; Counter Extremism Project, *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)*, n.d., url; ICCT, *The Shifting Sands of the Sahel's Terrorism Landscape*, 12 March 2020, url
[48] Stanford CISAC, *Mapping militant organizations – Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen*, last updated July 2018, url; Counter Extremism Project, *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)*, n.d., url
[49] Stanford CISAC, *Mapping militant organizations – Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen*, last updated July 2018, url; Long War Journal, *Analysis: Jihadist exploitation of communal violence in Mali*, 17 July 2018, url
[50] Foreign Brief, *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin: a merger of al-Qaeda affiliates*, 25 April 2020, url; ICG, *Getting a Grip on Central Sahel's Gold Rush*, 13 November 2019, url
[51] ICCT, *The Shifting Sands of the Sahel's Terrorism Landscape*, 12 March 2020, url; Foreign Brief, *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin: a merger of al-Qaeda affiliates*, 25 April 2020, url; SWP, *Jihadism in Africa*, June 2015, url, p. 75
[52] Foreign Brief, *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin: a merger of al-Qaeda affiliates*, 25 April 2020, url; Krause, D., *How transnational jihadist groups are exploiting local conflict dynamics in Western Africa*, 10 May 2020, url; TNH, *Understanding the causes of violent extremism in West Africa*, 10 May 2013, url
[53] Foreign Brief, *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin: a merger of al-Qaeda affiliates*, 25 April 2020, url
[54] Stanford CISAC, *Mapping militant organizations – Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen*, last updated July 2018, url
[55] ICCT, *The Shifting Sands of the Sahel's Terrorism Landscape*, 12 March 2020, url
[56] CTC at West Point, *The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent*, August 2018, url, p. 21

the turn of the millennium, claiming its opposition not only to Western civilisation but also to the secularisation of the Nigerian state.[57]

There is a fair consensus that Boko Haram's activities in its first years were more or less peaceful and that its radicalisation followed a government clampdown in 2009, in which some 800 of its members were killed. After the attack, the group's leader, Mohammed Yusuf, was killed while in police custody.[58] In March 2015, the leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, pledged allegiance to IS. Five days later, IS recognised the pledge.[59] The same month, IS spokesman Abou Mohamed al-Adnani released an audio message directing individuals who could not enter Iraq or Syria to travel to West Africa.[60] Upon the pledge of allegiance to IS in 2015, Boko Haram formally ceased to exist, and the former Boko Haram group, under the name of ISWAP, increased its violence, especially its suicide bombings and particularly those conducted by women and children.[61]

By August 2016, tension in the relationship between ISWAP and the IS central leadership became apparent. The IS leadership appointed another leading figure within the group, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, as the de facto leader of ISWAP. Abubakar Shekau refused to accept this. Consequently, IS in West Africa split into two factions, al-Barnawi's faction and Shekau's faction.[62] In the following years, the branch led by Barnawi primarily operated in the Lake Chad Basin region under the name of ISWAP. Shekau's faction operated near the Sambisa Forest in northeast Nigeria under the name of Boko Haram/JAS but was also sometimes referred to as a second branch of ISWAP.[63]

In April 2018, estimates from the US Department of Defence put the membership of Barnawi's IS faction at 3,500 fighters. According to the same source, Shekau's faction counted 1,500. As of July 2018, Barnawi's faction was the largest IS faction in Africa with roughly three and a half times as many fighters as the second largest IS cell in Africa, Islamic State-Sinai (in Egypt), and more fighters than all other IS cells in Africa combined. In February 2020, the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC at West Point) and the UN estimated that ISWAP had approximately 3,500-5,000 fighters. However, despite its still relatively large fighter base, Barnawi's ISWAP cell currently has lower fighter numbers than when the Barnawi and Shekau groups were unified under the moniker of Boko Haram before their split in 2016.[64]

Since its formation, ISWAP has carried out numerous attacks in Nigeria.[65] In 2017-2019, the group for instance conducted attacks on Nigerian troops and army bases, and on at least two occasions, it managed

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[57] Brookings, *Explaining the Emergence of Boko Haram*, 6 May 2014, url
[58] Brookings, *Explaining the Emergence of Boko Haram*, 6 May 2014, url
[59] CTC at West Point, *The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent*, August 2018, url, p. 21
[60] United Nations Security Council, *Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)*, 23 February 2020, url
[61] CTC at West Point, *The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent*, August 2018, url, p. 21
[62] CTC at West Point, *The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent*, August 2018, url, p. 22; United Nations Security Council, *Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)*, 23 February 2020, url
[63] CTC at West Point, *The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent*, August 2018, url, p. 22
[64] CTC at West Point, *The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent*, August 2018, url, p. 22; United Nations Security Council, *Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)*, 23 February 2020, url
[65] CGP, *ISIS in Africa: The End of the "Sahel Exception"*, 2 June 2020, url; United Nations Security Council, *Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)*, 23 February 2020, url

to capture towns in northern Nigeria. In February 2018, the group abducted 110 Nigerian schoolgirls, and in March, they kidnapped three aid workers during an attack killing dozens of other people.[66] More recently, in May 2020, ISWAP militants allegedly killed eight soldiers near a mining site in Yagha province in Burkina Faso.[67] On 3 May 2020, the group purportedly attacked a border post near Diffa city in Niger's Diffa region, killing at least two soldiers.[68] As of mid-2020, ISWAP primarily operates along the borders in the south-eastern part of Niger and the south-western part of Chad.[69]

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)

The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) came to rise in May 2015 when Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, a senior leader for an al-Qaeda-aligned group known as al-Mourabitoun, pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, then 'caliph' of the universal so-called 'Caliphate' of IS. Sahraoui and dozens of fighters left al-Mourabitoun and formed the IS grouping known as the Islamic State in Mali which later came to be known as ISGS.[70]

ISGS is based in Mali and Niger operating along the Mali-Niger border and in Burkina Faso. Since 2018, the group has gained popular support in northern Mali and has contributed to an escalating Salafi-jihadist insurgency in Burkina Faso.[71]

Estimates about the group's emergence in May 2015 placed its fighter count at 40. Later estimates from 2017 and 2018 have assessed the group to have as many as 425 fighters. Since mid-2018, subject matter experts have suggested the number to be between 200 and 300.[72] Despite its humble size compared to other insurgent groups operating in West Africa, ISGS manages to inflict high casualties by co-opting people into assisting their attacks using bribery and intimidation. However, these people are not "true" members.[73]

The type of support ISGS receives from the larger IS group is unknown.[74] Moreover, it took IS Central seventeen months to recognise the pledge of allegiance from ISGS – far longer than from other affiliates around the world – hinting at a possible problem in the command structure.[75] However, this has not

[66] United Nations Security Council, *Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)*, 23 February 2020, url
[67] ICG, *Crisis Watch: Burkina Faso*, May 2020, url
[68] ICG, *Crisis Watch: Niger*, May 2020, url
[69] CGP, *ISIS in Africa: The End of the "Sahel Exception"*, 2 June 2020, url; United Nations Security Council, *Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)*, 23 February 2020, url
[70] CTC at West Point, *The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent*, august 2018, url, p. 23; ICG, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, 3 June 2020, url; Stanford CISAC, *Mapping militant organizations – Islamic State in the Greater Sahara*, last updated July 2018, url; TNH, *Jihadis, vigilantes, and demoralised troops: A who's who in Burkina Faso's spiralling crisis*, 9 March 2020, url; United Nations Security Council, *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)*, 23 February 2020, url
[71] CGP, *ISIS in Africa: The End of the "Sahel Exception"*, 2 June 2020, url; United Nations Security Council, *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)*, 23 February 2020, url; Stanford CISAC, *Mapping militant organizations – Islamic State in the Greater Sahara*, last updated July 2018, url
[72] EER, *Jihadist Competition and Cooperation in West Africa*, 3 April 2020, url; CTC at West Point, *The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent*, august 2018, url, p. 23
[73] EER, *Jihadist Competition and Cooperation in West Africa*, 3 April 2020, url
[74] Stanford CISAC, *Mapping militant organizations – Islamic State in the Greater Sahara*, last updated July 2018, url
[75] EER, *Jihadist Competition and Cooperation in West Africa*, 3 April 2020, url

stopped ISGS from becoming a powerful group.[76] According to CTC at West Point, ISGS poses a notable threat in its area of operations and has carried out numerous attacks since its formation.[77]

While ISGS launched several notable attacks in 2016, it was the group's October 2017 ambush on Nigerien and US soldiers outside the village of Tongo Tongo, Niger, killing four American soldiers and several Nigerien soldiers that brought ISGS to global attention.[78] Since February 2018, the group has clashed repeatedly with French counter-terrorism forces and allied militia groups.[79] As of June 2018, ISGS had claimed 15 attacks, yet was presumed to be responsible for many more. In May 2019, the group once again ambushed soldiers in the village of Tongo Tongo, this time killing 28 Nigerien soldiers.[80] By the end of 2019, ISGS was launching sophisticated and hugely lethal attacks in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.[81] The modus operandi of ISGS reportedly includes abduction, execution, and suicide bombing.[82]

By building alliances with diverse communities, IS tightened its grip on the tri-border area between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, and ISGS fighters inflicted substantial casualties upon the security forces of all three countries in the first half year of 2020. In addition, there was a spike in assassinations and abductions which systematically targeted state collaborators. By June 2020, International Crisis Group (ICG) assessed ISGS to be the most potent security threat in Niger.[83]

The 2020-spike in violence followed a failed, joint, Malian/Nigerien military surge against ISGS from 2017 to mid-2018 and subsequent Nigerien government efforts to pursue dialogue with communities where jihadism had taken root. In 2018, Niger suspended counter-terrorism cooperation with Malian militias in northern Tillabery and began trying to counter IS through outreach to communities where the group was present. The decision was taken after authorities saw that the Malian/Nigerien cooperation triggered bloodletting among competing nomadic tribes in the area, which in turn drove some of them further into the hands of IS. However, the Nigerien authorities' efforts to win back the loyalty from local communities also failed.[84]

In December 2019 and January 2020, Nigerien security forces suffered some of their deadliest attacks, losing scores of troops in assaults mounted by ISGS in the Tillabery region. Following these events, Niger returned to a military approach. On 13 January 2020, France, Niger, and other Sahelian governments issued

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[76] EER, *Jihadist Competition and Cooperation in West Africa*, 3 April 2020, url
[77] CTC at West Point, *The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent*, August 2018, url, p. 23
[78] EER, *Jihadist Competition and Cooperation in West Africa*, 3 April 2020, url; CTC at West Point, *The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent*, august 2018, url, p. 23; ICG, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, 3 June 2020, url; Stanford CISAC, *Mapping militant organizations – Islamic State in the Greater Sahara*, last updated July 2018, url; United Nations Security Council, *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)*, 23 February 2020, url
[79] Stanford CISAC, *Mapping militant organizations – Islamic State in the Greater Sahara*, last updated July 2018, url
[80] EER, *Jihadist Competition and Cooperation in West Africa*, 3 April 2020, url; CTC at West Point, *The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent*, august 2018, url, p. 23; United Nations Security Council, *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)*, 23 February 2020, url
[81] EER, *Jihadist Competition and Cooperation in West Africa*, 3 April 2020, url
[82] EER, *Jihadist Competition and Cooperation in West Africa*, 3 April 2020, url; CTC at West Point, *The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent*, August 2018, url, p. 23; United Nations Security Council, *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)*, 23 February 2020, url
[83] ICG, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, 3 June 2020, url
[84] ICG, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, 3 June 2020, url

a joint statement calling for strengthening military capabilities in the region and agreeing to target IS as a matter of priority.[85]

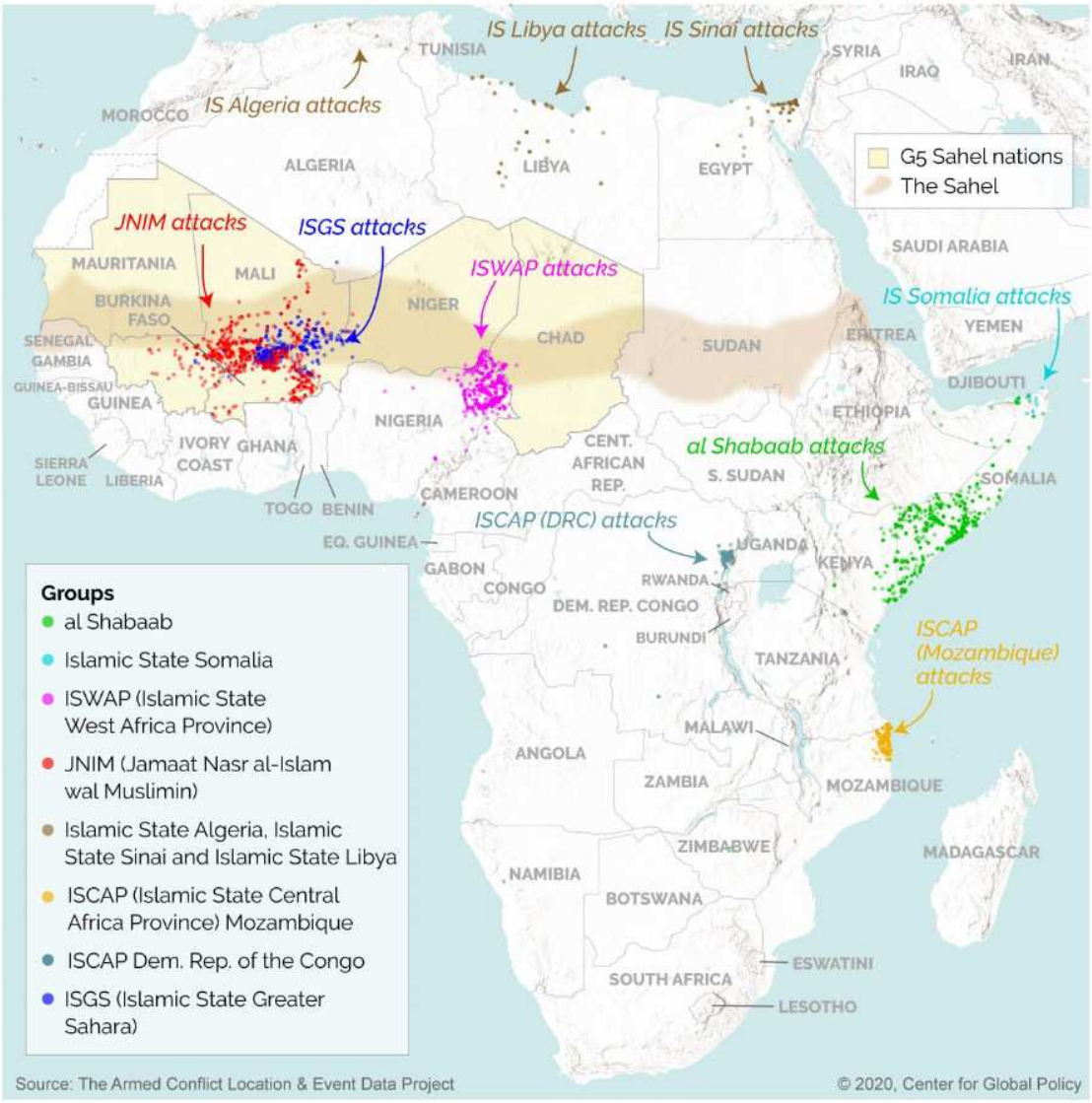
The conflict between the authorities and IS in northern Tillabery, as elsewhere in the Sahel, is fundamentally driven by inter- and intra-communal competition over rights and resources, which IS has exploited. Historically speaking, the counter-terrorism strategies seeking to weaken jihadist groups in these areas have often enflamed the situations they seek to calm, e.g. by killing civilians accused or mistaken for being IS elements. According to ICG, by June 2020, the renewed military offensive against ISGS seems to be no exception to this; local communities in northern Tillabery are already alleging that military operations have caused scores of civilian deaths. During the research for this report, no corroborated information about the overall impact of the new military campaign has been found.[86]

[85] ICG, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, 3 June 2020, url
[86] ICG, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, 3 June 2020, url

Geographical Presence

The rise of JNIM, ISWAP and ISGS in West Africa came in the context of a general rise in violent extremism in the area since 2016. The violence spread from northern Mali, to the centre of the country, east to Niger, south to Burkina Faso, and even to the Gulf of Guinea.[87] Attacks were carried out in Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and the Ivory Coast, and there were reports of possible attacks in Senegal as well.[88] The vast majority of attacks have taken place in rural areas. [89]

Figure 1: Islamic State Provinces and Rival al Qaeda Affiliates' Areas of Operations in Africa, March 2017 to May 2020



Source: CGP, *ISIS in Africa: The End of the "Sahel Exception"*, 2 June 2020, url

[87] EER, *Jihadist Competition and Cooperation in West Africa*, 3 April 2020, url
[88] CTC at West Point, *The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent*, August 2018, url, p. 21
[89] Krause, D., *How transnational jihadist groups are exploiting local conflict dynamics in Western Africa*, 10 May 2020, url

Between December 2018 and March 2020, the number of internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso, a country of 20 million inhabitants, increased from less than 50,000 to over 800,000. A main trigger behind this dramatic development was an escalation of attacks and massacres carried out by groups affiliated with AQ and IS. Among the Sahelian countries, Mali, Niger, Chad, and the northern parts of Nigeria had already been experiencing high levels of jihadist violence prior to the escalation in Burkina Faso. In the beginning of 2020, attacks also increased in Cameroon's northernmost province. Moreover, events in 2019 and 2020 also gave rise to an increasing fear of a spill-over effect into the neighbouring countries Togo, Ghana, and Benin as jihadist fighters were reportedly arrested trying to enter these countries from Burkina Faso. Meanwhile both AQ and IS repeatedly declared their intention to extend their influence in the area.[90]

[90] Krause, D., *How transnational jihadist groups are exploiting local conflict dynamics in Western Africa*, 10 May 2020, url

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