

HIGHLIGHTS

- Jama'at Ahl al-Sunnah li-l-Da'wah wa-l-Jihad (JAS aka Boko Haram) launched an attack on Maiduguri on 23 February, killing more than ten civilians and wounding more than 40. The attack occurred as the military has increased pressure against insurgents in NE Nigeria.
- Daesh-Central highlighted ISWAP's activities in multiple newspaper coverage, video clips and photo-reports. It also claimed attacks deeper into Niger than have ever been claimed, and, on 24 February, declared a new 'economic war.'
- The character of this coverage was broadly consistent with what has been observed in bygone weeks: ISWAP was being celebrated as a central player in Daesh's global war. However, its scale was more extensive than usual, which suggests that any communication difficulties that ISWAP had been experiencing in late January have now been rectified.



Fig. 1: A boy wounded by the bombing in Maiduguri. Image via Borno State Governor's office.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

I. Regional Context Analysis

The Nigerian army continued its offensive against violent extremist organisations (VEOs) in **NE Nigeria**, which has gained steam since President Buhari appointed new military chiefs last month. While troops had been forced to retreat from Marte following ISWAP attacks there earlier, on 23 February the Nigerian Army (NA) has reclaimed control of the town, according to multiple local sources.¹ The army repeatedly detonated a number of IED devices in and around the town during clearance operations.

Jama'at Ahl al-Sunnah li-l-Da'wah wa-l-Jihad (henceforth, JAS) launched a significant attack against Maiduguri on 23 February. According to local reports, an RPG struck a football pitch where young boys were playing a match, killing at least 10 civilians and wounding 40 more.² JAS claimed the attack several days later in a video seen by Nigerian news sources.³ According to local media, JAS leader Abubakar al-Shekau issued threats against Muslim civilians in the video claim:

'Don't count yourself a Muslim simply because you pray the salat and give in charity,' he said. 'No! So long as you embrace Western values you are not one of us. We will not be on the same page until you truly submit to Allah.'

The statements indicate that JAS continues to operate according to exceptionally broad targeting parameters and may launch similar attacks in the future. JAS remains active around Jere LGA and in the outskirts of Maiduguri Metropolitan Area, according to a source close to the security sector.

Heightened insecurity in and around Maiduguri has compounded significant social and economic challenges faced by residents. Since ISWAP attacked a transmission tower in early January as part of its so-called 'economic war' (see section 2. *Tactical Analysis*) the city has had only intermittent electricity, with residents forced to pay for fuel-to-power generators. This has led to some protests, with residents expressing anger about high electricity bills despite the blackout.⁴

Moreover, a number of mass kidnappings have taken place over the past week by unidentified armed elements, increasing the sense of insecurity and ill-ease among residents of Northern Nigeria. At least 42 people, including 27 students, were kidnapped

1 <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/02/troops-kill-scores-of-terrorists-recapture-marte/>

2 <https://globalsentinelng.com/2021/02/23/over-four-killed-scores-injured-in-maiduguri-rocket-explosions/>

3 <https://www.channelstv.com/2021/02/25/shekau-claims-responsibility-for-maiduguri-bombing/>

4 <https://promptnewsline.com/blackout-electricity-firm-reacts-as-residents-of-maiduguri-protest-electricity-bill/>

by gunmen in Katsina state on 17 February.⁵ On 26 February, armed men kidnapped an as-yet unidentified number of female students from a secondary school in Zamfara state.⁶ While JAS and affiliates have staged mass kidnappings in the past, the tactic has also been deployed by bandits and criminal elements to raise money from ransom funds.

Niger has seen a worrying uptick in violence over the past week. Some attacks—including against an IED which killed seven poll workers in Niger’s Western region of Tillaberi, were directly related to the second round of presidential elections, which took place on 21 February.⁷ In an apparently similar attack, a convoy of official poll workers was targeted in Diffa, killing one.⁸ The election—which should herald Niger’s first democratic handover of power—remains contested, although Mohammed Bazoum, the ruling party candidate from Diffa, was declared the provisional winner.⁹ Members of the opposition party have held protests in Niamey, leading the authorities to shut down the internet entirely on 24 February.¹⁰ While connectivity was restored approximately 24 hours later, it remains weak.

Aside from the election-related violence, a number of VEO-related incidents were also recorded, some of which were attacks claimed by ISWAP (see Section 2. *Tactical Analysis*). Around 15 February, however, multiple reports noted that a conflict between ISWAP and JAS had broken out near Bosso, Niger in the Lake Chad Basin. According to ExTrac contributors, the clash was between the predominantly Kanuri ‘Bakura’ faction, linked to JAS, and a predominantly Peul/Fulani IS faction. Local sources noted that some 30 VEO militants were killed in the conflict. The incident revealed the complex undercurrents of territorial, historical, ethnic dynamics beneath VEO activity in the Lake Chad Basin.

In **Chad**, a series of mid-level attacks within the Lake Chad Basin were reported, continuing a trend witnessed over the past several months. According to ExTrac contributors in Chad, an army convoy struck an IED on 23 February, killing one soldier and wounding 8 others. While the casualty was not reported publicly, the United Nations reported an IED explosion on the same day which caused 83 households—some 422 people—to flee their homes.¹¹ According to local sources on the ground, suspected militants conducted at least one additional attack targeting fishermen in the islands around Lake Chad. It is suspected that VEOs are attempting to displace local populations to monopolise the lucrative local fish industry.

5 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-security-kidnapping-idUSKBN2AH14Y>

6 <http://saharareporters.com/2021/02/26/gunmen-storm-zamfara-school-kidnap-female-pupils>

7 <https://www.africanews.com/2021/02/22/niger-blast-kills-seven-election-workers-as-vote-counting-begins/>

8 <https://www.niameyetles2jours.com/l-uemoa/economie/2402-6535-niger-une-attaque-a-diffa-fait-un-mort-et-de-nombreux-blesses>

9 <https://www.africanews.com/2021/02/24/protests-erupt-in-niger-after-bazoum-wins-presidential-run-off-vote/>

10 <https://www.actuniger.com/societe/16987-niger-internet-bloque-suite-a-de-violentes-manifestations-postelectorales.html>

11 <https://reliefweb.int/report/chad/tchad-suivi-des-urgences-ett-tableau-de-bord-95-25-f-vrier-2021>



Fig 2: Policemen patrol the streets in Niamey following post-electoral protests. Image via AFP/Getty.

In **Cameroon**, while small-scale attacks continued, the army and local vigilante groups have become increasingly adept at responding to incursions. In an indicative incident, a suspected JAS member was identified by villagers near Kolofata who alerted defence forces. The suspect, who was carrying an AK-47 assault rifle, was neutralised, and no civilian lives were lost.¹² In another attack reported by local news sources, suspected insurgents entered the town of Kerawa and wounded a civilian before being pushed back by security forces.¹³ While attacks are still occurring relatively frequently, their relatively limited impact may suggest a lack of organisation among insurgent ranks or, as many have suspected, that disorganised criminal gangs are in fact masquerading as insurgents.

12 <https://twitter.com/SembeTv/status/1362031208184569857/photo/1>

13 <https://twitter.com/SembeTv/status/1363770571348180994>

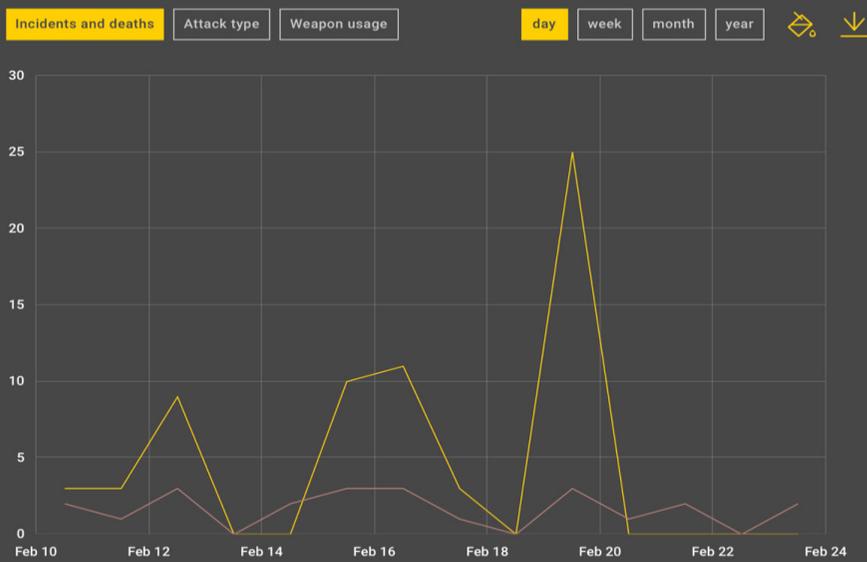


Fig 3: ISWAP-reported attacks and confirmed kills, 10 February to 23 February 2021

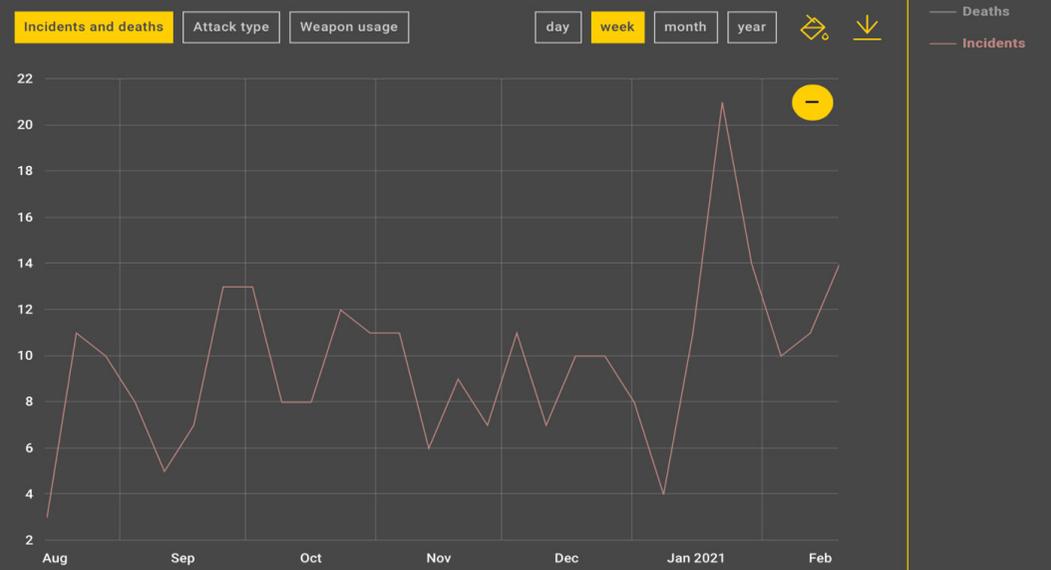


Fig 4: ISWAP-reported attacks, August 2020 to February 2021

2. Tactical Analysis

Operational dynamics. Between 10 and 23 February 2021, ISWAP reported that it carried out 23 operations, killing at least 64 and injuring dozens more. Per Daesh’s newspaper al-Naba’, a further 66 people were either killed or injured in the course of its kinetic activities during this period. Notably, on 24 February 2021, Daesh declared that ISWAP had launched an ‘ongoing’ campaign of economic warfare in West Africa.

It made this announcement when reporting a 23 February attack on power infrastructure in southern Niger, wherein three of the other attacks it reported in this period occurred, one near the border with Nigeria in Chetimari and the other due north of Kabelawa—that is, further into Niger than ISWAP usually operates. The attack was confirmed by local sources.¹⁴

ISWAP’s remaining 20 attacks were reported from Borno and Yobe states in north-eastern Nigeria.

Notably, Daesh claimed in its newspaper al-Naba’ that ISWAP had deployed an additional 11 otherwise unreported attacks during this period (bringing the total to 34), most of them in western Borno state. It did not provide detailed breakdowns for these attacks. Due to the persistence of other reporting irregularities which were observed in previous months, there is reason to believe that this significant discrepancy between individualised and aggregated claims could be down to historic communication difficulties between ISWAP and Daesh-Central.

In any case, if both the al-Naba’ statistics and individualised claims are considered together, this means that in the course of this reporting period ISWAP claimed slightly more attacks than it did in the previous fortnight. Given that that was a high point for ISWAP, one that was only eclipsed by the two weeks before it—during which ISWAP reported more attacks than it has ever before reported in a single two-week period—these latest data points indicate that ISWAP remains hyperactive, at least from a reporting perspective, in northeast Nigeria. It seems likely that this is its response to the NA’s Operation Lafiya Dole-Tura Takai Bango offensive in mid-January.

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/Diffajeunesse/posts/268388578210597>

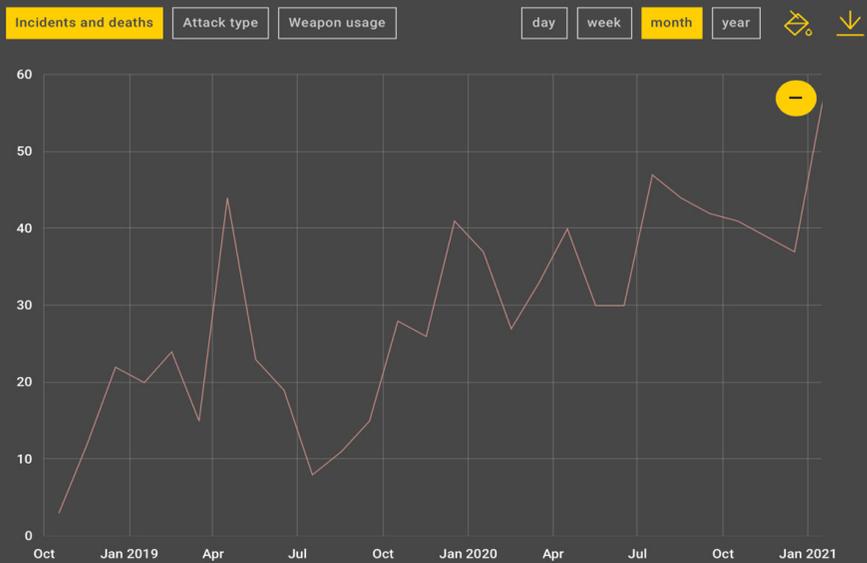


Fig 5: ISWAP-reported attacks, October 2018 to February 2021

Figure 4, which shows ISWAP attack reporting over the course of the last six months, not including the additional al-Naba’ data, demonstrates that ISWAP activities intensified in the second and third weeks of February after dipping slightly (but not below ‘normal’ levels) at the beginning of the month.

As noted in previous reporting, it would appear that ISWAP remains more consistently active than it has ever before been, let alone in 2021. This could indicate that it is trying to position itself more aggressively in the immediate aftermath of the NA’s onslaughts against it in the Alagarno Forest. That being said, it is important to note that, in many instances, Daesh is the sole source of information about these activities, which means it could be exaggerating. Nevertheless, it is not inconceivable that the NA is seeking to keep control of the narrative around its offensives in Borno state—if this is the case, it would be highly unlikely to publicise news of ISWAP’s successes.

Figure 5, which shows all attacks claimed by ISWAP since October 2018, shows that, whatever the actual extent of the peaks and troughs we have witnessed in recent weeks, they are broadly in line with the intensifying timbre of ISWAP’s kinetic activities over the course of the last year.

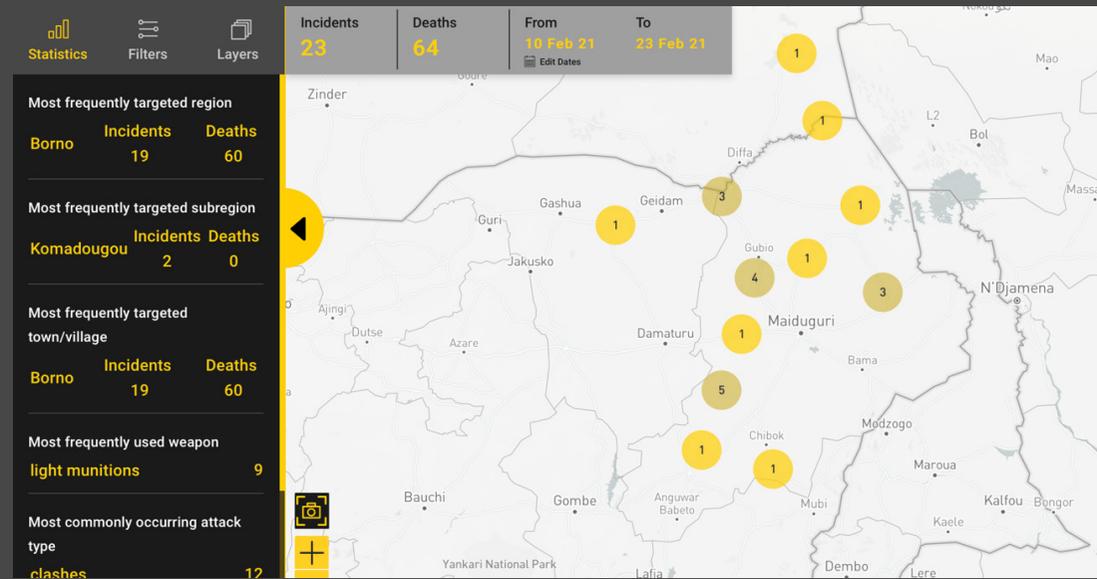


Fig 6: Geographic distribution of ISWAP-reported attacks, 27 January to 9 February, 2021

Reporting irregularities. After four weeks of relatively unusual reporting behaviour, which saw clusters of attack claims published collectively and an unusual degree of retrospective reporting, ISWAP’s claims behaviour returned to relative consistency during the last two weeks, with bulletins being published on a regular basis throughout. That being said, there remained a significant discrepancy when it came to the aggregated statistics prepared by al-Naba’ and the total number of individualised reports that Daesh published.

Notwithstanding this discrepancy, the unprecedented stream of video and photographic content that emerged from Nigeria towards the end of the reporting period would appear to indicate that any difficulties ISWAP was having in communicating with Daesh-Central are on their way to being rectified.

Geographic trends. Of the 23 individually reported ISWAP operations that occurred during this period, 19 took place in Borno state and one in Yobe state. Three were claimed from southern Niger, two near the border with Nigeria and one further north in the Diffa region.



Fig 7: Still from A'maq News Agency video of 21 February ISWAP suicide attack. Published 22 February.

Once more, no attacks were reported in Cameroon or Chad, even though a number of operations that were attributed locally to ISWAP were picked up by ExTrac contributors, as noted above. These unclaimed attacks could either have been exactly that—unclaimed ISWAP attacks—or perpetrated by ISWAP's rival in the region, the Abubakar Shekaul-led JAS, which has been more active in recent months, or by criminal gangs masquerading as extremist militants.

ISWAP's operations were spread throughout Borno state, though with a focus once more on the Alagarno Forest, wherein it sought to push back against NA forces, which have been exerting pressure on it there since mid-January. In total, it reported five attacks from the area, all of them in Borno state. Three of these attacks were, in line with trends noted in the last month or so, attacks on NA vehicles involving improvised explosive devices (IEDs) placed at roadsides. The use of IEDs at this level of consistency remains unusual for the group. The other two attacks in this part of the state were large-scale ambushes, one of which resulted in dozens of kills and casualties and a large number of disabled vehicles.

North of the Alagarno Forest towards the town of Goniri, ISWAP reported another four major operations, one of which was a suicide attack reported on 22 February about which Daesh-Central published a video. Given that ISWAP rarely deploys suicide attackers—this was the ninth such operation since January 2018 (one was claimed in 2018, four in 2019, two in 2020, and, as of 22 February, two being claimed already in 2021)—its use of suicide tactics in this context is highly significant and suggests that the strategic stakes are especially high for ISWAP at present.

ISWAP's other reported attacks were spread all over the rest of Borno state, with two claimed in the vicinity of Monguno, which was also assaulted in the last reporting period. This marks the longest period of sustained targeting of Monguno since it was attacked and briefly (though partially) occupied by ISWAP in the summer of 2020.

Moreover, east of Maiduguri, ISWAP launched two major assaults on NA positions close to the border with Cameroon. In the course of these assaults, it claimed to have killed more than two dozen members of the NA and destroyed, disabled or looted at least 15 armoured vehicles (including two tanks). Lastly, in southern Borno state, ISWAP fighters targeted the Christian town of Askira, razing a number of buildings, including a church, to the ground. In Nigeria, pro-government media sources reported that the Nigerian Army immediately responded to the attack and killed as many as 31 VEO members.¹⁵

It is important to note that, aside from one attack purported to have taken place about 20-30 kilometres west of the city limits on the Mainok-Jakana road, ISWAP reported no activities in the immediate vicinity of Maiduguri during the two weeks in question. This stands in stark contrast to the previous reporting period, when it launched three separate attacks in extremely close proximity to the city limits.

In Niger, the first of ISWAP's attacks, which was reported on 12 February, was fairly small-scale and significant only because it occurred inside the town of Chetimari. However, its second attack, which was reported on 21 February, was not only larger scale, tactically complex and more impactful; it also occurred deeper into Niger than ISWAP has claimed before. This could indicate that ISWAP is attempting to make further inroads into the country. Lastly, its 23 February attack on Niger's power infrastructure, marks the opening of a new economic front for ISWAP there. As noted above, this attack could not be independently verified by the ExTrac team in Niger or through open sources. Whether true or not, the claim suggests that ISWAP is eager to trumpet its newly announced 'economic war'.

¹⁵ <https://securitydigestng.com/2021/02/12/war-on-terror-troops-kil-31-boko-haram-fighters-destroy-9-gun-trucks-in-askira-uba/>



Fig 8: Flyer for ISWAP photo-report on ambush on NA near Gorigi. Published Still from A'maq News Agency video of 21 February ISWAP suicide attack. Published 23 February.

3. Comms Analysis

Over the last two weeks, ISWAP's activities in Nigeria and the broader Lake Chad region were foregrounded intensively by Daesh-Central.

Besides being front-page news in both issues of Daesh-Central's newspaper al-Naba', three video clips were published by the A'maq News Agency on 10, 12 and 22 February respectively, in addition to three photo-reports. This unprecedented uptick in audio-visual communications from Nigeria is especially significant given ISWAP's reporting silence in late January.

Whether it was video clips or photo-reports, all the ISWAP-focused materials published during this period were focused on emphasising the extent of its military capabilities. The first photo-report, published on 10 February, showed a technical and a drone captured in the course of its attack on the NA at Mainok. The second, published on 12 February, documented the aftermath of its attack on Askira in southern Borno. In a blatant attempt to polarise communities in NE Nigeria, this report showed, among other things,

a church being burned to the ground, an image that was shared widely on social media (and not just by supporters of Daesh). The last photo-report, published on 23 February, showed a series of images captured in the aftermath of one of ISWAP's attacks on the NA near Gorigi. It was typically graphic in nature. Notably, though, it appeared to have been shot on different equipment (potentially a mobile phone) to that normally used by ISWAP media operatives. The reason for this remains unclear at the time of writing.

All three of the videos published by the A'maq News Agency in relation to ISWAP's activities in Nigeria showed footage shot on the battlefield during intense fighting. In the video that was published most recently, that is, on 22 February, the ISWAP suicide attack near Goniri is documented in brief. In the video, a vehicle used in the operation itself is visible; to it has been appended armour plating drawn from one of the NA's Isotrex Phantom APCs that was destroyed by ISWAP in the Alagarno Forest in mid-January. This use of scavenged armour is a tried-and-tested tactic for Daesh the world over—it was first perfected in Iraq and Syria. It appears now to have been systematically exported into West Africa.



طائرة استطلاع اغتتمها جنود الخلافة بعد هجوم قرب بلدة (ماينوك) جمادى الآخرة 1442 WEST AFRICA

Fig. 9: Image of NA drone captured near Mainok. Published 10 February;



جنود الخلافة يحرقون كنيسة للنصارى بعد الهجوم على بلدة (أسكيرا) جمادى الآخرة 1442 WEST AFRICA

Fig. 10: Image of church arson during ISWAP attack on Askira. Published 12 February.

Conclusions

1. JAS continues to pose a significant threat to civilians in Maiduguri. The rocket attack near the city and claim of responsibility implying further attacks suggests that JAS remains a capable conflict actor with strategic capabilities that should not be dismissed.
2. While the extent and scope and objectives of ISWAP's new, 'economic war' remain unknown, the group's attack on power infrastructure in NE Nigeria have severely impact the lives and livelihoods of civilians.
3. The clash between JAS-aligned elements and an ISWAP faction in Niger highlights the fractious nature of the two groups which have a history of internal conflict. The reportedly ethnic element to the clash suggests that, at least in some cases, the priorities of ISWAP and JAS may be more localised than they are strictly ideological.