

## Daesh's West African Power Grab: A Strategic Assessment

August 2021

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# Outline

In mid-May 2021, ISWAP—Daesh's affiliate in West Africa—assaulted the last remaining stronghold of Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li-d-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad (JAS, aka Boko Haram) in south-eastern Borno state, Nigeria. The attack on JAS's strategic haven in the remote and sparsely populated Sambisa Forest resulted in the death of Abubakar Shekau, who had served as its leader for more than a decade, and in the *de facto* dissolution of JAS. On this basis, it was a major victory for ISWAP, which has coexisted uneasily with JAS for the last five years, as well as Daesh globally, which has framed ISWAP's latest inroads in the Lake Chad Basin as the start of a new triumphalist era for its caliphate.

This report assesses the significance of these developments, deploying the full range of qualitative and quantitative tools and datasets at ExTrac's disposal to parse through what happened and what it means for the region.

It has five sections:

**Section I** provides a detailed overview of ISWAP's assault on the Sambisa Forest. It draws on local ExTrac sources as well as messaging from ISWAP and JAS (including unpublished transcripts of leadership speeches and eyewitness accounts). This section:

Gives a detailed, triangulated account of how the campaign panned out in late May;

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Provides an assessment of the immediate on-the-ground implications of ISWAP's power-grab; and

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Describes and analyses all major locally disseminated ISWAP and JAS communications in relation to the Sambisa Forest assault.

**Section II** tracks Daesh's version of events, providing a detailed analytical timeline of its counter-JAS communications interventions. This section:

Establishes how, on a week-by-week basis, Daesh responded to ISWAP's attack on JAS;

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Gives a synopsis of all major publications and video features Daesh published in relation to the campaign; and

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Evaluates the significance of Daesh's media response in the context of its established patterns of communication from West Africa.

**Section III** considers the global impact of the assault, tracking how Daesh supporters (*munasirin*) have received the news on their closed networks on Telegram and Rocket.Chat. This section:

Describes the three ways that Daesh's global support base responded to news of the Sambisa Forest campaign;

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Tracks how, initially, many *munasirin* were visibly exasperated by the lack of clarity from Daesh's Central Media Diwan; and

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Details how this broad-based feeling of consternation subsequently transitioned into two more optimistic lines of discourse, one that set out to justify the 'Islamic' credentials of ISWAP's attack on JAS, the other framing ISWAP as ascendant and in a new state of strategic consolidation.

**Section IV** assesses how ISWAP's successful power grab over JAS has impacted—and stands to impact—its local strategic trajectory from both the perspective of manpower and territory. This section:

Relies on quantitative and geographic analysis of ISWAP kinetic activity and qualitative analysis of ISWAP/JAS group dynamics based on data from ExTrac's online and on-the-ground sources;

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Provides a detailed assessment of the strategic gains ISWAP has made in the Lake Chad Basin since its victory over JAS; and

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Identifies the exact locations in which ISWAP's capabilities have been directly impacted since May.

**Section V**, the report conclusion, discusses the strategic implications of these recent developments, weighing up what they mean locally from a territorial and tactical perspective as well as what impact they stand to have globally for Daesh as a whole. This section:

Considers how ISWAP's strategic outlook has evolved in the Lake Chad Basin over the course of the last quarter;

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Speculates as to how this outlook will continue to evolve in the coming quarter; and

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Sets out what all this means not just locally, but also in the context of Daesh as global movement.

# Introduction

In mid-May 2021, ISWAP—Daesh's affiliate in West Africa—assaulted the last remaining stronghold of Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li-d-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad (JAS, aka Boko Haram) in south-eastern Borno state, Nigeria. The attack on JAS's strategic haven in the remote and sparsely populated Sambisa Forest resulted in the death of Abubakar Shekau, who had served as its leader for more than a decade, and in the *de facto* dissolution of JAS. On this basis, it was a major victory for ISWAP, which has coexisted uneasily with JAS for the last five years, after Shekau abandoned the Daesh cause to pursue his independent agenda just a year on from pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Daesh's caliph at the time.

While no visual evidence of Shekau's demise has emerged to date, the news has now been confirmed by a wide range of sources—anything from ISWAP and Daesh leadership statements to JAS defector accounts. That said, the particular details of ISWAP's campaign on the Sambisa Forest remain shrouded in mystery, as do its broader strategic implications for militancy in north-east Nigeria and the rest of the Lake Chad Basin. This report addresses this knowledge gap, deploying the full range of qualitative and quantitative tools and datasets at ExTrac's disposal to parse through what happened and what it means for the region.

In doing so, it has five sections:

**Section I** provides a detailed overview of ISWAP's assault on the Sambisa Forest. It draws on local ExTrac sources as well as messaging from ISWAP and JAS (including unpublished transcripts of leadership speeches and eyewitness accounts);

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**Section II** tracks Daesh's version of events, providing a detailed analytical timeline of its counter-JAS communications interventions;

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**Section III** considers the global impact of the assault, tracking how Daesh supporters (*munasirin*) have received the news on their closed networks on Telegram and Rocket.Chat;

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**Section IV** assesses how ISWAP's successful power grab over JAS has impacted—and stands to impact—its local strategic trajectory from both the perspective of manpower and territory. This evaluation is based on quantitative and geographic analysis of ISWAP kinetic activity and qualitative analysis of ISWAP/JAS group dynamics based on data from ExTrac's on-the-ground sources; and

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**Section V**, the report conclusion, discusses the strategic implications of these recent developments, weighing up what they mean locally from a territorial and tactical perspective as well as what impact they stand to have globally for Daesh as a whole.

# I. The Sambisa Power Grab: What Happened, When, and How

The first reports about ISWAP's offensive in the Sambisa Forest emerged on 18 May.<sup>1</sup> Initially, they were confined to unsubstantiated rumours being posted on social media, with local Twitter users noting that they had got wind of a massive ISWAP attack on JAS involving around 50 vehicles and hundreds of fighters. Per these reports, several of Shekau's field commanders had been killed or dislodged and swathes of JAS territory captured. How Shekau himself had fared through the offensive was, at that moment, still unknown. A day later, however, reports began to trickle in that he too had been killed in battle.

Within hours, these initial reports were picked up by several local media outlets. Since Shekau's death had been declared multiple times since 2009, all were hesitant to declare it in any way confirmed this time around. Yet, with each passing day, more details—some of them tracking back to sources within both ISWAP and JAS—emerged about what had happened;<sup>2</sup> As such, it was not long before the news of Shekau's death was being treated as 'confirmed.'

Based on contemporaneous JAS and ISWAP audio recordings—which were published locally and, significantly, not through the usual online channels used by either JAS or ISWAP—it is possible to derive a clear picture of how things had elapsed.



Figure I. Satellite image of Sambisa Forest. Screenshot captured 28 May 2021.

<sup>1</sup> First reported by Captain Kyari Maguomeri (Rtd) on Twitter: '#ISWAP has taken over #JAS Territory whole of Sambisa Forest. Sources within says #ISWAP Fighters in about Fifty Gun trucks stormed Sambisa forest forcing JAS Commanders to surrender or face death. SHEKAU whereabout unknown,' Twitter, 18 May 2021, accessed at: <https://twitter.com/Damkarwa2/status/1394728089855344644>

<sup>2</sup> For example: M. Abdullahi, K. Adebajo, 'Boko Haram Strongman, Shekau, Dead As ISWAP Fighters Capture Sambisa Forest,' *HumAngle*, 20 May 2021, accessed at: <https://humangle.ng/boko-haram-strongman-shekau-dead-as-iswap-fighters-capture-sambisa-forest/>; K. Adebajo, 'How Did Abubakar Shekau Die? Here's What We Know So Far,' *HumAngle*, 21 May 2021, accessed at: <https://humangle.ng/how-did-abubakar-shekau-die-heres-what-we-know-so-far/>



Figure 2. Abubakar Shekau.



Figure 3. Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi.

### *Shekau's Last Words*

Five days into ISWAP's attack on the Sambisa Forest, which began on 13 May, JAS published an audio statement from Shekau, which, as it turned out, was his last. Dated 18 May 2021, it framed JAS as a victim of ISWAP treachery.<sup>3</sup> In the recording, Shekau's tone was unprecedented: he sounded distressed rather than triumphalist.

As he set out how JAS had found itself in this embattled state, Shekau confirmed what had long been suspected by JAS watchers: that, in or around 2011, he had reached out to local al-Qaeda (AQ) groups in Mali and ultimately received financial support from them. Shekau nevertheless noted that this relationship did not last long.

Indeed, the loss of funding from AQ drove Shekau to establish ties with Daesh in 2014-15. At the time, Daesh was in a period of global ascendancy, having captured much of Iraq and Syria and declared its caliphate. Due to its successes and AQ's apparent lack of sustained interest, Shekau pledged allegiance (*bay'ah*) to Daesh's then leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in 2015 to become the *wali* of its newly minted West Africa Province. Just over a year later, he continued, he was 'wrongfully' ousted from ISWAP along with a group of his fighters, something that led to his reestablishment of JAS.

Interestingly, Shekau claimed in the recording that, while JAS operated independently from—and, indeed, was often at odds with—ISWAP, his group has been loyal to Daesh throughout.

### *ISWAP Breaks Its Silence (Locally)*

Just under three weeks later, ISWAP's leader, Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi, responded to Shekau's claims and, in doing so, confirmed his and JAS's demise.<sup>4</sup>

In the statement—which again was published offline through local ISWAP channels independent of Daesh-Central—Barnawi decried Shekau's 'extremist' take on Islam, noting that the Sambisa Forest operation had been directly ordered by Daesh's global leadership with a view to stamping it out.

In the same breath, Barnawi also provided an account of how Shekau had met his end. He said that his fighters had been pursuing Shekau inside the Sambisa Forest for five days until he was finally located and told to surrender. Even though he was told he would be eligible to become ISWAP's new *wali* if he agreed to Daesh's terms, Barnawi said Shekau had refused and then detonated his explosive vest, dying instantly.

3 M. Abdullahi, 'Shekau's Last Message Throws Light On Links With Global Terror Groups, ISWAP Offensive,' *HumAngle*, 26 May 2021, accessed at: <https://humangle.ng/shekaus-last-message-throws-light-on-links-with-global-terror-groups-iswap-offensive/>

4 R. Maclean, 'Boko Haram Leader Really Did Kill Himself, Audio Message Says,' *The New York Times*, 7 June 2021, accessed at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/07/world/africa/nigeria-boko-haram-leader-dead.html>

**JAS's Remnants Respond**

In the days that followed, JAS was almost completely dismantled by ISWAP. This included its propaganda arm, which, as is noted below, has now been incorporated into Daesh's West Africa Province Media Office. This meant JAS was unable to confirm the death of its leader and encourage its members to rally behind a new one. Indeed, since the Sambisa Forest assault, JAS's established outreach network on Telegram has been entirely inactive.

That being said, the Bakura Group, one of the few factions that did not immediately defect to ISWAP after Shekau's death, did make one significant intervention on 14 June.<sup>5</sup> In the video statement, which appeared to have been shot close to the shores of Lake Chad, Bakura Sahalaba, the spokesman of the Bakura Group, confirmed that Shekau had indeed died but held that the remaining 'lions' of JAS would continue *jihad*. Sahalaba added that they would, in principle, be willing to pledge allegiance to Daesh's leader and, in doing so, join ISWAP, should the conditions be right.



Figure 4. Still from Bakura Group video. Video obtained 14 June 2021.

<sup>5</sup> First reported by Vincent Foucher on Twitter: 'A new video... an unidentified spokesperson w. armed militants claims they are #JASDJ members, admits to the death of Shekau, denounces #ISWAP and insists that it's not all over... #BokoHaram,' Twitter, 14 June 2021, accessed at: <https://twitter.com/VincentFoucher/status/1404199076955144197>

## 2. Daesh's Version of Events: Lifting the Reporting Moratorium



While news of Shekau's capture and death had spread rapidly across local activist, humanitarian and media networks, the Sambisa Forest campaign was implemented under a total media blackout on ISWAP's part. This section tracks Daesh's staggered communications interventions on the campaign, which, by July 2021, it had documented in detail.

Figure 5. ISWAP photo-report from Katafila. Published 15 June 2021.

### **16 May to 13 June: Media Blackout**

Daesh's Central Media Diwan (including both the West Africa Province Media Office and al-Naba') refrained entirely from commenting on the Sambisa Forest campaign throughout its duration and for much of the four weeks that followed. Given that a handful of attack reports emerged from southern Niger's Diffa region and southwestern Borno state during this period, this media blackout was confined just to the activities of Daesh's network in southeast Borno state. Based on what ExTrac's on-the-ground sources were reporting at the time, ISWAP's activities appeared to have been largely suspended during the first few weeks that followed the assault.

### **15 June: Media Office Intervention**

From mid-June onwards, ISWAP's media office began publishing communications at an accelerating rate of output.

The office first broke its silence on 13 June, when it published an attack report regarding an assault in south-eastern Borno state,<sup>6</sup> something it followed up with a photo-report two days later.<sup>7</sup> From a thematic perspective, these images were fairly unremarkable: they tracked an offensive military operation and were geared towards framing ISWAP as strategically capable and tactically ambitious.

However, from a geographic and stylistic perspective, they were interesting. First, they provided visual confirmation of what had been reported by ISWAP earlier in the week: that ISWAP's kinetic capabilities in the southeastern part of Borno state had expanded, either because former JAS militants had sided with it following Shekau's death, or because it now had greater freedom of movement in the area (also because of Shekau's death).

Perhaps more tellingly, there were subtle framing differences between these images and 'normal' Daesh content, which is carefully regulated by Daesh-Central. The differences indicated that the images had been captured by a defected JAS photographer who had only recently linked up with Daesh's Central Media Diwan.

It is worth noting that, at the time that this photo-report emerged, there had been no confirmation (independent or otherwise) of any JAS defections to ISWAP, let alone reporting from Daesh about what had happened in the region. On that basis, it was received with great enthusiasm by Daesh's *munasirin* community.

<sup>6</sup> The original ISWAP statement about the attack said: 'By the grace of Allah Almighty, The Soldiers of Caliphate attacked a barracks of the apostate Nigerian Army in the town of Katafila in the Borno region yesterday, where clashes took place with various types of weapons, leading to deaths and injuries to several of them [i.e., the Nigerian soldiers], and the rest of them fled. The Mujahideen burned the barracks and a tank, and seized a four-wheel-drive vehicle and weapons, and ammunition, Praise be to Allah.'

<sup>7</sup> 'Aspect of the attack of the soldiers of the caliphate on a *murtadd* Nigerian Army position in the town of Katafila in Borno state,' West Africa Province Media Office, 15 June 2021.



Figure 6. Transcript of  
Daesh leadership speech.  
Published 24 June 2021.

## 22 June: Leadership Statement

Daesh's next substantive intervention on the Sambisa Forest campaign came a week later, on 22 June, when its official propaganda distribution network on Telegram circulated links to a new audio statement from its spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi.<sup>8</sup> This was the first release from Daesh-Central's Furqan Foundation since October 2020.

In the specific context of West (and, to a lesser degree, Central) Africa, Qurashi congratulated Daesh supporters there for 'mobilizing in favour of your state, *imam* and *mujahidin* brothers, and helping to enforce the *shari'a*.' He also noted that, in Africa, '[Daesh] is opening the doors for anyone seeking *jihad*.' This was the first time Daesh's central leadership has expressly encouraged *hijrah* (migration) to its ranks in years.

On the conflict between ISWAP and JAS, Qurashi broke Daesh's month-long silence. Addressing ISWAP directly, he said,

**'We commend your efforts in eradicating the *fitna* [rebellion] of the *khawarij* [a pejorative reference to early Muslim extremists, in this case referring to Shekau's JAS] and thank Allah for his help in showing [JAS] supporters the right path. We pray that they mobilise around the imam Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi. We were pleased to hear the news of their *bay'a*, and we inform them that the caliph has accepted their *bay'a* [...] and is advising them to be steadfast and to not be used by heretics[.]'**

Besides this confirmation of the counter-JAS campaign and allusion to defections from JAS, Qurashi provided no additional details regarding what had happened in Sambisa Forest.

<sup>8</sup> Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, 'And you are the supreme ones if you are believers,' Furqan Foundation, 22 June 2021.

### 25 June: Video Feature

Three days after Qurashi's statement, Daesh media operatives took to their closed network on Telegram to circulate download links to the first long-form video release from West Africa since February 2020.<sup>9</sup>

Entitled, 'Those Who Enjoin What Is Right: Returning to the Community of the Muslims in West Africa,' the 14-minute video was centred around the aftermath of ISWAP's attack on the Sambisa Forest. It asserted that it had resulted in mass defections from JAS to ISWAP.

In the video, former JAS fighters speaking in Arabic, Hausa, and English were filmed talking about unity and how, following 'some mistakes' (meaning several clashes), JAS and ISWAP had now reconciled. By way of confirmation, footage was cut in showing large cohorts of Shekau's former fighters, perhaps around 300 people in all, pledging allegiance to Daesh's leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi. Some of them were later shown attacking a Nigerian Army (NA) base in southeastern Borno state, purportedly in mid-June.

The video contended, fairly convincingly, that ISWAP's operation in the Sambisa Forest had led to the effective absorption of Shekau's JAS into its ranks. However, it did not mention Shekau by name, nor did it account for reports that certain factions of JAS had refused to defect to ISWAP.



Figure 7. Still from ISWAP video, 'Those who enjoin what is right.' Video published 25 June 2021.

<sup>9</sup> 'Those who enjoin what is right,' West Africa Province Media Office, 25 June 2021.

### 30 June: Al-Naba' Writeups

In the 293<sup>rd</sup> issue of Daesh's weekly newspaper al-Naba', the Central Media Diwan provided its most detailed assessment of the outcome of the Sambisa Forest campaign to date.

One article at the beginning of the publication discussed its strategic implications for West Africa as a whole.<sup>10</sup> Entitled 'Our Unity and Their Fragmentation in Africa,' it framed the absorption of JAS as just one of several significant geopolitical developments in the region that have played directly into Daesh's hands. Besides JAS's collapse, the author noted that several nation-states in West Africa and the Sahel had entered into a rapidly disintegrating 'state of fragmentation,' which had so far manifested in the deaths of Chadian President Idriss Déby Itno and Nigerian Chief of Army Staff Ibrahim Attahiru, in a second *coup d'état* in Mali and the subsequent suspension of French military operations there, and in an attempted *coup d'état* in Niger. With this strategic backdrop, the author concluded, Daesh militants in the region presented a uniquely unified front, one that had ballooned 'after thousands of mujahidin joined its ranks to support the Muslim *ummah*' following the dissolution of JAS.

Later in the same issue Daesh provided a more detailed writeup regarding the Sambisa Forest campaign.<sup>11</sup> In an article entitled 'The Ruling on the Khawarij in Nigeria and the Return of Thousands to the Muslim Community,' it provided a history of ISWAP's relations with JAS as well as an account of exactly, per Daesh's official narrative, what had happened.



Figure 8. Image from al-Naba' writeup on JAS defections. Published 30 June 2021.

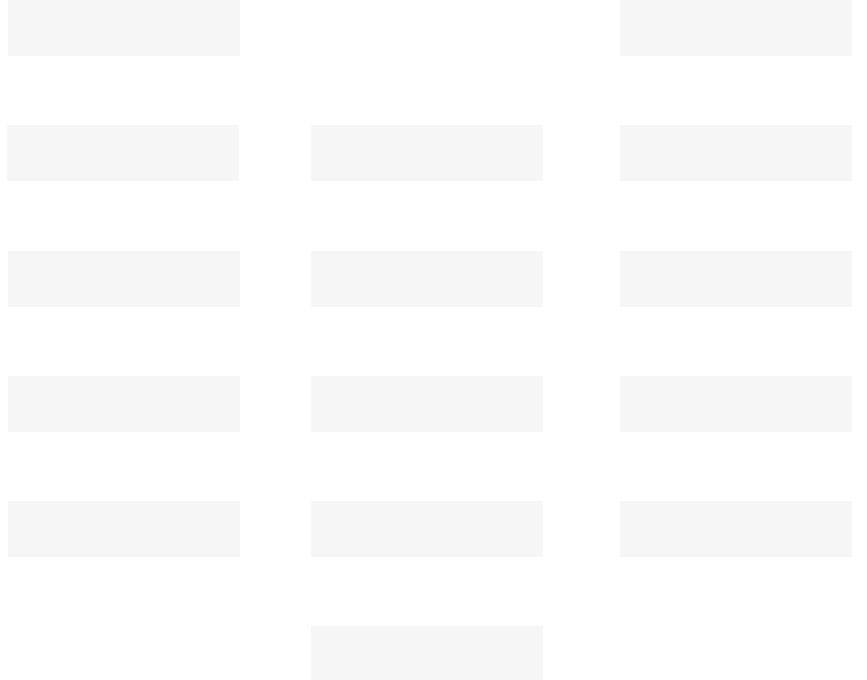
<sup>10</sup> 'Our Unity and Their Fragmentation in Africa,' al-Naba' #293, 1 July 2021.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Ruling on the Khawarij in Nigeria and the Return of Thousands to the Muslim Community,' al-Naba' #293, 1 July 2021.

It noted that, when Daesh first established itself in Nigeria, Shekau had joined its fold reluctantly on the back of pressure from his advisors and JAS's rank and file supporters. From the outset, there were major differences in jurisprudence between the two parties. Shekau regarded the majority of Sunni Muslims as *murtaddin* on the basis that they were 'disbelievers unless proven otherwise,' something that later saw him committing several atrocities against Sunni Muslims, as well as, on a small number of occasions, attacking members of ISWAP. On this basis, the article explained, Shekau had ultimately been excommunicated from Daesh. When he left, he managed to convince a small number of his supporters to leave with him and set up a base in the Sambisa Forest.

The article then described how, in mid-May—just prior to *Eid*—ISWAP had received orders to pursue and kill Shekau. It described him as paranoid: Shekau had apparently 'stripped his soldiers of their weapons, for fear of a coup,' making JAS especially vulnerable at that point in time. In response, ISWAP set out to ambush and attack JAS's four main headquarters in the Sambisa Forest, neutralising most of Shekau's supporters within 48 hours. In the days that followed, it was rumoured that Shekau had been killed, which caused the 'rest of his fighters to repent' and join Daesh.

By 16 May, ISWAP had completely captured Shekau's Sambisa Forest stronghold, which the article said had allowed local civilians to return to their homes after being 'invited' to join Daesh. Despite the earlier rumours, though, Shekau did not die until 18 May—i.e., four or five days after news of his death first began circulating. Daesh-Central's account lined up, predictably, with that of Barnawi; Shekau was said to have died when, surrounded by ISWAP fighters, he detonated an explosive vest.



### 3. *Munasirin* Perceptions: What This Means for Daesh Globally

Daesh's supporters reacted to the news of its Sambisa Forest conquests in two waves. The first was characterised by consternation at the absence of any confirmation or denial from Daesh-Central regarding the reports. The second comprised two complementary lines of discourse, one framing ISWAP's purported absorption of JAS as a repeat of Daesh's experiences in Iraq and Syria in 2013-15, the other providing an Islamic justification for the attack on JAS that framed it as good for Muslims across the world.

Figure 7. Daesh *munasirin* discussing JAS and Abubakar Shekau. Posted 20 May 2021.



**Lack of Information**

Consternation was principally clustered around the last ten days of May, a few days after the first reports on Shekau's demise had first begun to emerge. Daesh supporters took to key discussion boards on Telegram to seek confirmation or denial of what 'the enemies of Islam' were reporting, posting messages like:

**'There are rumours about the death of Shekau, the head of the khawarij.'<sup>12</sup>**

**'Shekau died today?'**<sup>13</sup>

**'Have you heard about Shekau's killing at the hands of the state?'**<sup>14</sup>

**'Brothers, who has certain news about what happened in the Sambisa Forest between the brothers and Shekau's group?'**<sup>15</sup>

**'I request that you clarify the position of dawlat al-khilafa towards Abubakar Shekau and his group.'**<sup>16</sup>

**'It has been three days since the antichrist's media started broadcasting false news about Shekau. Is there any [confirmed] analysis?'**<sup>17</sup>

These queries were stonewalled by key influencers in the Daesh ecosystem, who called on the *munasirin* community to be patient and wait for comment from the Central Media Diwan. A week into the rumours, for example, one influencer wrote, 'Peace, mercy and blessings of Allah be upon you all. An urgent and important message: The official media [of Daesh] has so far not made any statement regarding the killing of Shaykh Abubakar Shekau.'<sup>18</sup>

By early June, it was generally accepted that Shekau had indeed died in the course of some sort of ISWAP incursion. Daesh influencers continued to post that the *munasirin* should 'wait for the details'<sup>19</sup> from the Central Media Diwan. However, they gradually stopped calling for them to withhold judgement as to whether the news was true in the first place.

Notably, not everyone was happy about this, especially given that ISWAP had published internal Hausa messaging regarding the developments. On 15 June, for example, one user wrote,

**'Brothers, how can I be expected to sit here and wait for notification from official media when [Shekau] was killed 20 days ago. His death was confirmed on the same day that he died, yet the state was silent. They only published a statement by Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi and that was directed only at Nigerians.'**<sup>20</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Telegram post, 'Urdun al-Khilafa,' 20 May 2021, 2015 BST.

<sup>13</sup> Telegram post, 'Tawa'iyya Amniyya,' 21 May 2021, 2015 BST.

<sup>14</sup> Telegram post, 'Muntada Ahl al-Tawhid,' 24 May 2021, 2248 BST.

<sup>15</sup> Telegram post, 'Haqiqat al-Sira,' 25 May 2021, 1634 BST.

<sup>16</sup> Telegram post, 'Haqiqat al-Sira,' 25 May 2021, 1641 BST.

<sup>17</sup> Telegram post, 'Haqiqat al-Sira,' 8 June 2021, 1736 BST.

<sup>18</sup> Telegram post, 'Muntada Fursan al-'Ilam,' 27 May 2021, 1830 BST.

<sup>19</sup> Telegram post, 'Aham al-Akhbar,' 6 June 2021, 2001 BST.

<sup>20</sup> Telegram post, 'Al-Jawahir al-Dawlawiyya,' 15 June 2021, 1005 BST.

### Justifying Fratricidal Violence

The next dominant line of discourse that emerged in the wake of the Sambisa Forest campaign was focused on justifying the supposed Islamic credentials of the attack. This was especially important for Daesh given that it had implicitly excommunicated Shekau and his supporters from the fold of Islam by engaging in the attack. The absence of any official commentary on the campaign had, moreover, left it to the *munasirin* to ward off criticism against Daesh.

This type of messaging tended to be the purview of known *munasir* influencers rather than unknown individuals in the ecosystem. Indeed, the justifications being put forth required a certain amount of expertise in both the history of Daesh and Daesh's chosen school of theology.

The influencers' arguments revolved around one core premise: that JAS's supporters were 'fair game' because they were 'bandits, criminals and extremists'<sup>21</sup> who had allied themselves to Shekau, who himself was 'impulsive, power-loving and fame-hungry.'<sup>22</sup> Shekau was a deluded 'psychopath'<sup>23</sup> who had been implementing a programme of 'bid'a [innovation] and *khariji* doctrine [extremism]',<sup>24</sup> 'ruin[ing] everything'<sup>25</sup> for the prospects of Sunni Muslims in Nigeria. With his death, 'extremism [in West Africa] had met its catastrophic end.'<sup>26</sup>

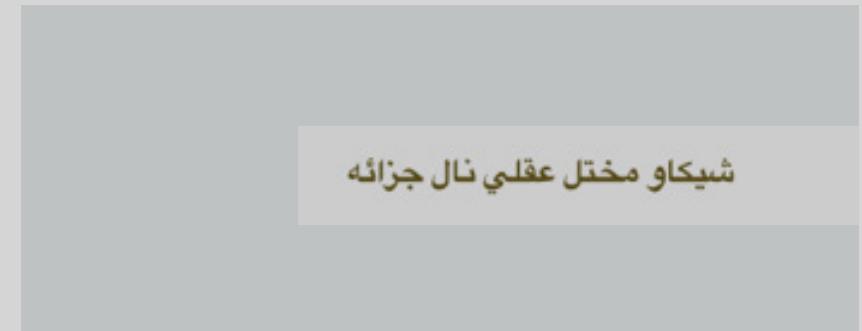


Figure 8. Daesh *munasir* refers to Shekau as a 'psychopath.' Posted 22 June 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Telegram post, 'Urdun al-Khilafa,' 18 May 2021, 2247 BST.

<sup>22</sup> Telegram post, 'Muntada Nusrat Ahl al-Tawhid,' 21 May 2021, 0730 BST.

<sup>23</sup> Telegram post, 'Munaqishat,' 22 June 2021, 1902 BST.

<sup>24</sup> Telegram post, 'Bilad al-Haramayn,' 1 July 2021, 2239 BST.

<sup>25</sup> Telegram post, 'Muntada Nusrat Ahl al-Tawhid,' 21 May 2021, 0730 BST.

<sup>26</sup> Telegram post, 'Muntada Nusrat Ahl al-Tawhid,' 21 May 2021, 0739 BST.

In setting out this framing for why ISWAP moved against JAS, Daesh supporters compiled their own sanitised retelling of the Sambisa Forest campaign. They asserted that ISWAP was acting in pre-emptive self-defence and that, accordingly, the claims that 'the state fought Shekau out of animosity and not because he was khariji and shedding the blood of innocents'<sup>27</sup> were all lies.

This narrativisation around what happened was a transparent attempt to establish community consensus around what had happened between ISWAP and JAS, and it was in full swing long before Daesh-Central weighed in on the matter.

Figure 9. Daesh munasir sets out military implications of Sambisa Forest campaign. Posted 25 June 2021.

#دراسة\_واقع #نيجيريا  
قد يتسائل البعض أخي مجريات ما هي دراستك لآخر التطورات في نيجيريا ؟  
ماذا بعد انضمام مجموعات كبيرة لجماعة المس.امين في نيجيريا ؟  
الحمد لله الذي من على المسلمين بما حدث في نيجيريا .  
بداية / ساتحدث عن أماكن نشاط كل من بوكو حرام وجماعـة المسـ.امين حتى تتضح الصورة إن شاء الله .  
أولاً: بوكـو حرام وأماكن تواجدها في نيجيرـيا ، حسب إطلاعـي وتبعـي لـلـأـخـارـ والمـصـادـرـ المحليةـ ، وـقـاعـتـيـ لـلتـقـارـيرـ الـغـرـبـيـةـ وـالـمـحـلـيـةـ .  
يعـتـبرـ جـبـ غـابـةـ سـامـبـيـسـاـ الإـسـترـاتـيـجـيـةـ ، أـكـبـرـ وـأـضـخـمـ جـبـ كـانـتـ تـمـتـلـكـهـ بـوكـوـ حـرـامـ فـيـ نـيـجـيرـياـ ، أـيـ أـنـهـ (ـالـمـركـزـيـةـ)ـ الـتـيـ يـدـارـ مـنـهـ .  
طـبـعـاـ هـنـاكـ بـعـضـ التـوـاجـدـ لـهـمـ فـيـ بـحـرـةـ تـشـادـ ، تـحـتـ سـلـطـةـ الشـخـصـ الثـانـيـ لـشـ.ـيـكـوـيـ  
الـدـعـوـ بـاـكـوـراـ .  
كـمـ آنـ لـهـمـ تـوـاجـدـ أـخـرـ شـمـالـ غـربـ الـكـامـيـرـونـ ، عـلـىـ الحـدـودـ مـعـ مـدـيـنـةـ غـورـاـ وـسـلـسـلـةـ جـبـالـ غـورـاـ  
كـانـ يـدـارـ مـنـ شـ.ـيـكـوـيـ .  
وـاخـيـراـ تـوـجـدـ مـجـمـوعـاتـ بـإـقـلـيمـيـ النـيـجـرـ وـزـامـفـراـ شـمـالـ غـربـ نـيـجـيرـياـ ، عـلـىـ الحـدـودـ مـعـ  
بـوـرـكـيـنـافـاسـوـ وـبـنـيـنـ .  
ثـانـيـاـ:ـ بـالـسـابـقـ تـحـدـثـ عـنـ أـمـاـكـنـ نـشـاطـ وـسـيـطـرـةـ المسـ.ـامـينـ فـيـ نـيـجـيرـياـ ،ـ سـاسـرـدـهـاـ بـشـكـلـ  
سـرـيعـ .  
يـتوـزـعـ تـوـاجـدـ المسـ.ـامـينـ فـيـ نـيـجـيرـياـ عـلـىـ 4ـ جـبـوبـ كـانـتـ بـالـسـابـقـ وـمـنـهـ :  
جبـ بـحـرـةـ تـشـادـ ، جـبـ غـورـاـمـالـ شـمـالـ مـدـيـنـةـ مـاـيـدـوـجـورـيـ ، جـبـ بـوـنـسـفـارـيـ عـلـىـ الحـدـودـ مـعـ  
الـنـيـجـرـ غـربـ دـيفـاـ ، جـبـ غـابـةـ الـغـارـنـوـ اـقـصـيـ جـنـوبـ غـربـ اـقـلـيمـ بـرـنـوـ عـلـىـ الحـدـودـ مـعـ إـقـلـيمـيـ  
يـوبـيـ وـادـامـواـ ،ـ وـاخـيـراـ الجـبـ الخـامـسـ جـدـيدـ هوـ غـابـةـ سـامـبـيـسـاـ الإـسـترـاتـيـجـيـةـ .  
فـبـعـدـ الـخـطـابـ الـاخـيـرـ اـتـضـختـ الصـورـةـ ثـوـعاـ مـاـ هـوـ قـادـمـ وـاـهـ اـعـلـىـ وـاعـلـمـ ،ـ يـعـتـبرـ جـبـ  
سـامـبـيـسـاـ الإـسـترـاتـيـجـيـةـ الـذـيـ كـانـ (ـمـركـزـيـةـ)ـ بـوكـوـ حـرـامـ ،ـ وـكـذـلـكـ مـنـ كـانـ يـتـواـجـدـ فـيـ بـحـرـةـ تـشـادـ  
مـعـ بـاـكـوـراـ هـمـ الـلـذـانـ اـنـضـمـاـتـ تـحـتـ لـوـاءـ جـمـاعـةـ المسـ.ـامـينـ ،ـ وـالـتـحـقـوـ بـرـبـ الـجـمـاعـةـ بـالـصـورـةـ  
الـظـاهـرـةـ حـتـىـ الـآنـ ،ـ وـقـدـ شـاهـدـنـاـ وـسـمـعـنـاـ عـدـدـ مـنـ الـأـخـارـ وـالـتـقـارـيرـ الـمـصـوـرـةـ وـالـمـسـلـجـةـ لـآخـرـ  
هـجــمــاتـهـمـ عـلـىـ قـوـاتـ الـجـيـشـ الـنـيـجـيرـيـ فـيـ ذـاتـ الـمنـطـقـةـ ،ـ وـالـتـيـ نـشـرـهـاـ إـلـاعـمـ الرـسـمـيـ .  
وـبـالـسـيـطـرـةـ عـلـىـ غـابـةـ سـامـبـيـسـاـ ،ـ يـمـكـنـنـ القـولـ بـانـ غـابـةـ إـقـلـيمـ بـوـرـنـوـ أـصـبـحـ إـمـاـ إـنـهـ تـحـتـ  
سـيـطـرـةـ أوـ نـشـاطـ المسـ.ـامـينـ ،ـ وـالـذـيـ تـقـرـرـ مـسـاحـتـ بـ2ـ9ـ2ـ8ـ9ـ8ـ كـمـ2ـ ،ـ أـيـ مـاـ يـعـادـلـ مـسـاحـةـ دـولـةـ  
الـأـرـدنـ ،ـ وـيـقـطـنـهـ مـلـاـيـنـ الـعـوـامـ "ـالـمـخـزـونـ الـبـشـرـيـ"ـ يـقـدـرـ بـ6ـ0ـ0ـ0ـ0ـ0ـ نـسـمـةـ .  
بـلـ وـحـتـىـ مـدـيـنـةـ مـاـيـدـوـجـورـيـ الإـسـترـاتـيـجـيـةـ وـالـذـيـ تـعـتـبرـ عـاصـمـةـ إـقـلـيمـ بـوـرـنـوـ ،ـ أـصـبـحـتـ بـينـ فـكـيـ  
كـماـشـةـ تـحـتـ رـحـمـةـ المسـ.ـامـينـ ،ـ حـيـثـ فـرـضـ عـلـيـهاـ الـحـصـارـ مـنـذـ مـاـ يـقـارـبـ عـامـ ،ـ وـكـلـ الـطـرـقـ الـبـرـيـةـ  
الـوـاـصـلـةـ لـلـمـدـيـنـةـ تـحـتـ نـشـاطـ المسـ.ـامـينـ ،ـ وـخـرـهـاـ جـنـوبـ الـمـدـيـنـةـ حـيـثـ غـابـةـ سـامـبـيـسـاـ ،ـ وـكـذـلـكـ  
تـدـمـيـرـهـمـ لـأـيـرـاجـ الـكـهـرـبـاءـ بـيـنـ الـفـيـنـةـ وـالـأـخـرـ ،ـ كـانـ آخـرـهـاـ تـقـرـيـبـاـ بـتـارـيخـ 17/6/2021ـ .  
أـمـاـ بـالـنـظـرـ لـلـمـجـمـعـاتـ السـكـانـيـةـ وـمـنـ يـتـواـجـدـ بـدـاخـلـهـاـ مـنـ عـوـامـ المسـ.ـامـينـ ،ـ كـثـيرـ مـنـهـمـ يـفـضـلـونـ  
سـيـطـرـةـ المسـ.ـامـينـ وـيـرـجـبـونـ بـتـوـاجـدـهـمـ وـيـنـضمـنـهـمـ الـيـهـاـ كـلـ فـتـرـةـ .

<sup>27</sup> Telegram post, 'Jazirat al-'Arab,' 23 June 2021, 2016 BST.

## *A New Era of Tamkin*

The last and most extensive line of *munasirin* discourse in relation to the Sambisa Forest campaign revolved around what these developments meant from a strategic perspective for ISWAP in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin and Daesh globally.

Throughout these communications, the idea that recent events in Nigeria resembled Daesh's operations and progress in Syria and Iraq in 2013-14 permeated strongly. *Munasirin* influencers observed that, based on the current governance, military and factional circumstances, history was repeating itself.

From the perspective of governance, they held that ISWAP was in a period of ‘*tamkin* [consolidation] in West and Central Africa with the grace of Allah, and [that it was] enforcing the *hudud* [capital and corporal punishments for religious crimes] and collecting *zakat* [religious tax].’<sup>128</sup> Another *munasir* influencer observed that,

'[B]y controlling Sambisa, we can now say that most of Borno state is either under the rule of the state or within its reach. Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state, is almost under the mercy of the Muslims.'<sup>29</sup>

From a military perspective, the consensus among the *munasirin* ecosystem was that ISWAP is now much stronger than it was before. In late June, one Telegram user observed that '18 out of 20 JAS leaders had surrendered to ISWAP in the Sambisa Forest,'<sup>30</sup> with the latter gaining 'thousands'<sup>31</sup> of fighters. This, another noted in early July, had resulted in a situation where 'as many as 90 percent of ISWAP attacks against Nigerian and Cameroonian security forces have been launched from the strategic Sambisa Forest.'<sup>32</sup> In other words, the attack was a game-changer for ISWAP's strategic outlook.

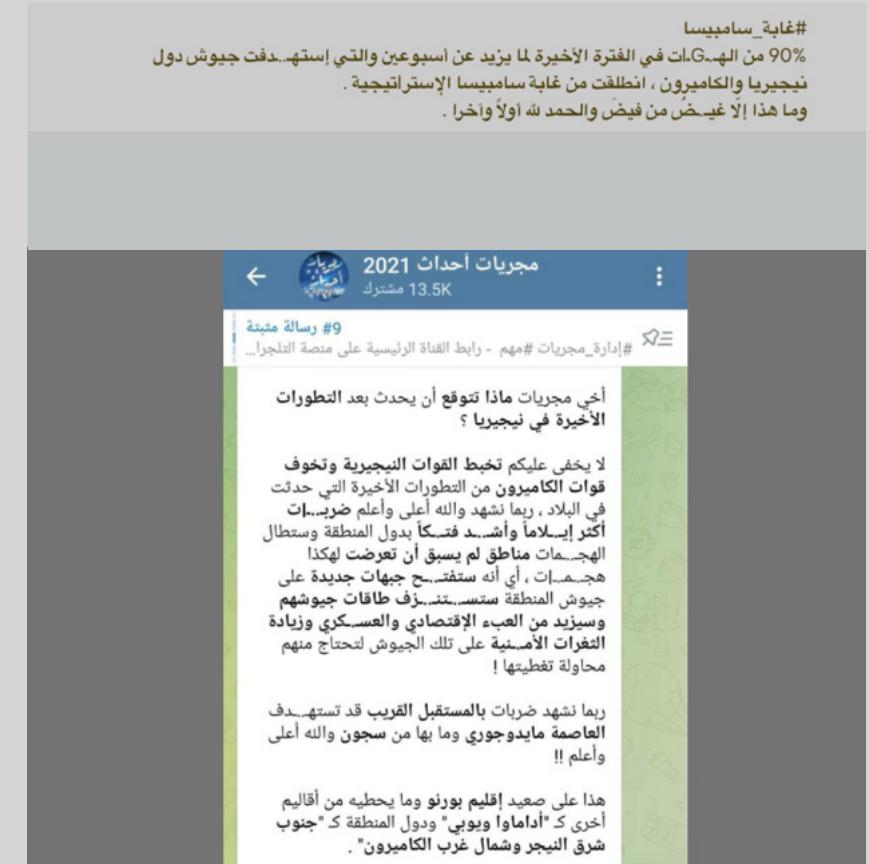


Figure 10. Daesh supporters discuss JAS defections. Posted 4 July 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Telegram post, 'Munazirat Hurrat Huwarat,' 20 June 2021, 1749 BST

<sup>29</sup> Telegram post, 'Muntada al-Haq al-Mubayyan,' 25 June 2021, 1640 BST

<sup>30</sup> Telegram post, 'Al-Juwahir al-Dawlawiyya,' 23 June 2021, 0616 BST.

<sup>31</sup> Telegram post, 'Haq Saj,' 2 July 2021, 1540 BST

<sup>32</sup> Telegram post, 'Majriyyat Ahdath 2021,' 6 July 2021, 2042 BST.

## 4. Consolidation and Expansion: ISWAP's Strategic Trajectory, Post-JAS

As explained above, ISWAP kept a low profile in the first few weeks after Shekau's death. While its cells in Niger and Chad continued to issue reports as normal, its Nigeria-based network claimed far less activity than is usually the case. From mid-June onwards, however, this changed, with ISWAP appearing to enter into a period of aggressive ascendancy. It reported high-casualty attacks from a greater range of locations than ever before—including, importantly, former JAS-dominated territories in southeastern Borno state.

### *Recent Operational Dynamics*

This dynamic is visualised in Figures 11 and 12, which track ISWAP attack (Figure 11) and kill (Figure 12) reporting from Nigeria over the course of the last six months. The graphs show a three-week period in May/June in which just two attacks and no fatalities were reported. They also show the marked acceleration in attack reporting that started in mid-June and continued to mid-July, when ISWAP reported attacks at about double its 12-week average rate.

When considered in the context of ISWAP's broader strategic trajectory over the course of the past few years, this consecutive dip-and-spike dynamic takes on even greater significance. Figure 13 shows all attacks reported by ISWAP since October 2018, the point which ExTrac's records on this date back to (prior to that month, ISWAP reporting emerged with extreme irregularity). It demonstrates that the post-Sambisa Forest campaign pause brought ISWAP activity levels in Nigeria to the lowest they had been since late summer 2019, when it had to temporarily suspend its operations due—among other reasons—to an unusually intense rainy season.

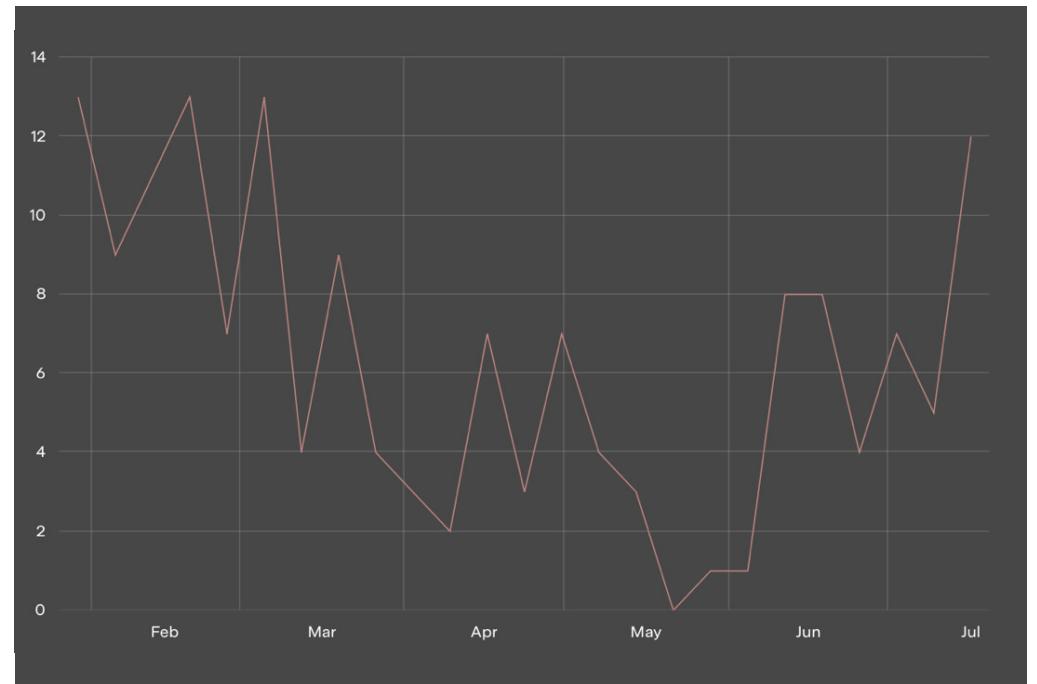


Figure 11. ISWAP attack reporting in Nigeria, January 2021 to July 2021.

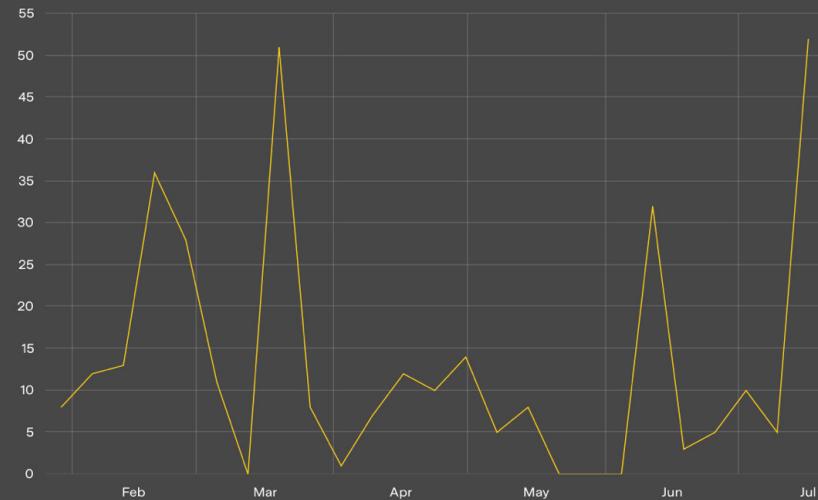


Figure I2. ISWAP lethality reporting, January 2021 to July 2021.

When considered in the context of ISWAP's operational peak in January 2021, which was a response to NA's bungled Operation Tura Takai Bango, the post-Sambisa campaign pause is by far the most marked operational drawdown in ISWAP's history. However, as Figure I3 also shows, ISWAP's activities have picked up significantly in the weeks since and are, at the time of writing, approaching their pre-Sambisa campaign average.



Figure I3. ISWAP attack reporting in Nigeria, October 2018 to July 2021

This operational recovery tracks back to 13 June, when a group of ISWAP fighters, very likely former members of JAS, attacked a Nigerian Army (NA) base in Katafila, near the road from Pulka to Bama. While the attack itself was not significant in terms of its material impact (its most significant outcome was the damage to a Vickers Mk3 Main Battle Tank), it marked ISWAP's *de facto* expansion into JAS's former sphere of influence.

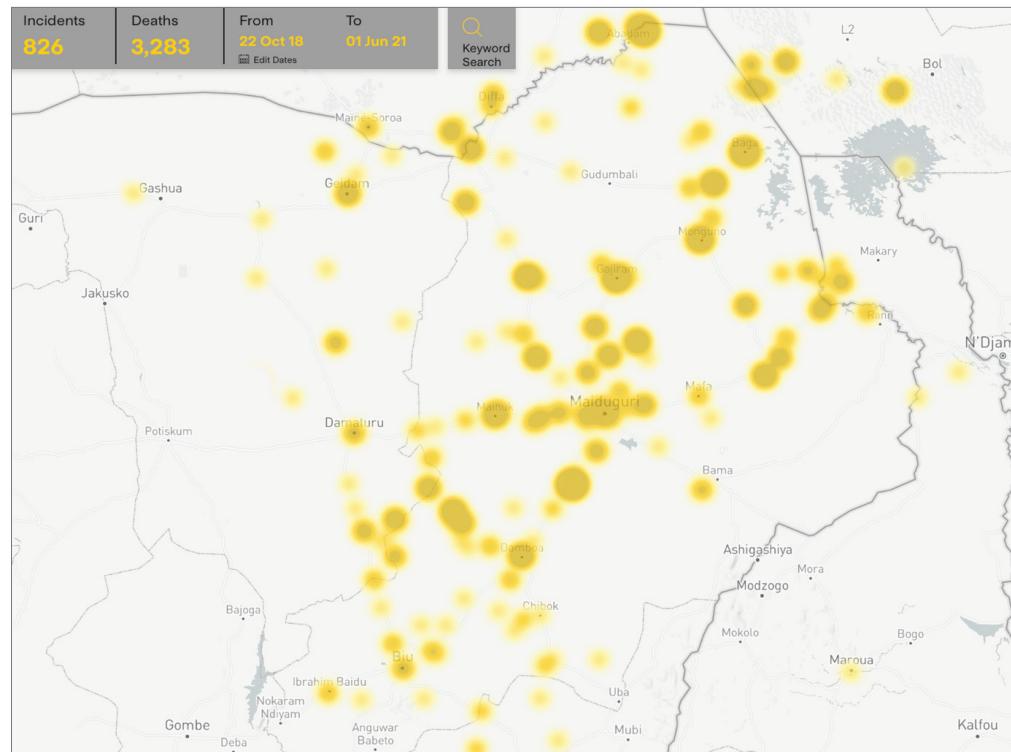


Figure 14. Location of ISWAP-reported kinetic activity, October 2018 to July 2021.

In the weeks that followed, the Katafala attack was followed by a string of other operations in the southeastern Borno state—places in which ISWAP had never before reported a presence. Before long, the majority of ISWAP's attacks were being reported from areas close to the Sambisa Forest—places like Kumshe, Mayanti, Konduga, Pulka, Bula Yobe or Gwoza, all of them in Bama, Gwoza, or Konduga Local Government Areas (LGAs). Moreover, beginning in late June and continuing into early July, ISWAP was also reporting attacks in former JAS-dominated territories in Cameroon, in particular in the Mayo-Sava and Mayo-Tsanaga districts of Far-North province, where ISWAP has also not previously been present.

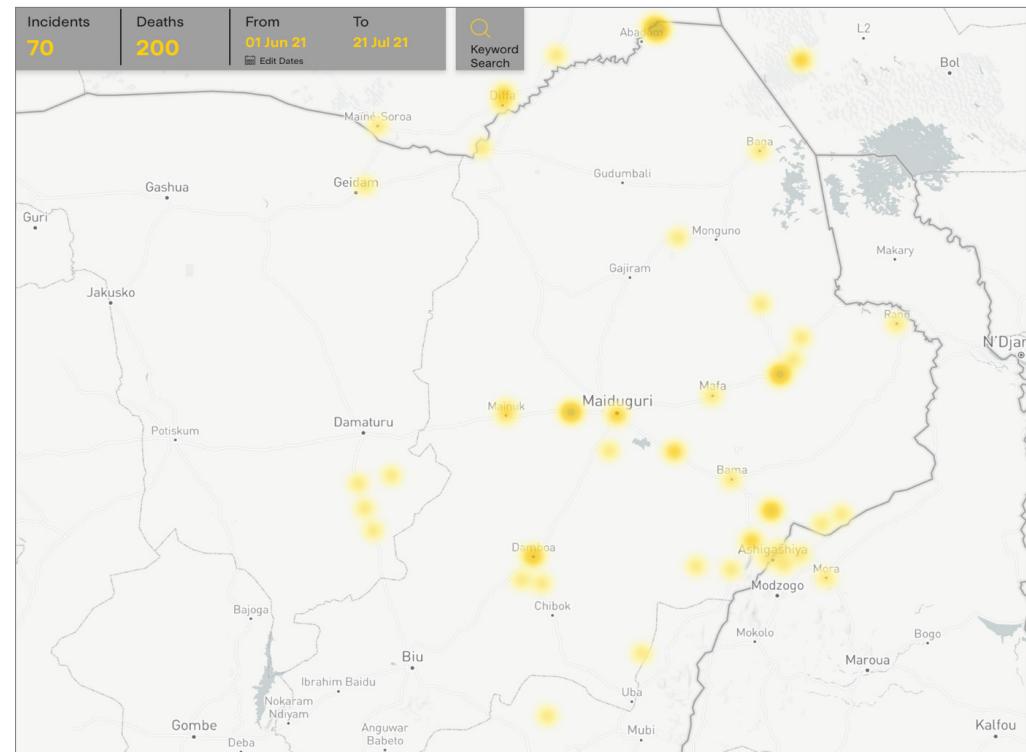


Figure 15. Location of ISWAP-reported kinetic activity, June 2021 to July 2021.

This operational expansion in southeast Borno state and northwest Cameroon is visualised in Figures 14 and 15. Note the near-three-year absence of attacks around Ashigashiya and Modzogo in Figure 14, which shows all ISWAP attack reports from October 2018 to June 2021, compared with the same areas in Figure 15, which shows ISWAP attack reports from just the period following its Sambisa Forest offensive (i.e., June 2021 to July 2021).

## 5. Implications

ISWAP's attack on JAS were not just significant because it resulted in the absorption of hundreds—if not, as was claimed by Daesh in early July, thousands—of new fighters into its ranks.

Rather, its capture of the Sambisa Forest means that it has also gained access to all major roads leading to the Borno state capital, Maiduguri. It may therefore be capable of besieging the city, or at least plaguing its outskirts with attacks and exhausting the security forces deployed within.

To date at least, such a campaign has not been attempted by ISWAP. Instead, its operations in the environs of Maiduguri has been restricted to opportunistic abductions. These attacks have been tied to three roads in particular—those leading from Maiduguri to Damaturu, Damboa, and Monguno. While the Monguno road has been relatively quiet of late, this is due more to a change in ISWAP's priorities than it is to the NA's ability to secure it. As for the Damaturu road, which tracks west of Maiduguri, the situation has deteriorated precipitously of late, with attacks occurring along it almost every day in July 2021.

Above all, it is the Damboa road that stands to be impacted most by ISWAP's gains in the Sambisa Forest. In the course of the last year, it was already plagued by mass casualty ambushes against NA convoys and patrols, which had been enabled by ISWAP's entrenched presence in the Alagarno Forest in southwestern Borno state. With ISWAP's new ascendance east of Damboa, these attacks are likely to pick up significantly.

When these inroads are considered alongside ISWAP's gains elsewhere in the Lake Chad Basin, the strategic outlook is particularly concerning. On the Niger-Nigeria border, for example, ISWAP is also making gains. While it has not been reporting as regularly on the Nigerian side of the border as it was earlier in the year, it has been consistently—and unusually—active on the Nigerien side over the last two months.

In particular, the border towns of Mallam Fatori and Bosso have been a consistent focus of indirect fire attacks. The locations of these towns—i.e., close to Lake Chad, far from other major population centres, and without good transport connections to other parts of the region (especially Mallam Fatori)—means that they make for strategically appealing and vulnerable targets. Unlike many other towns in northern parts of Borno state, Mallam Fatori has not once, since 2018, been in danger of falling into ISWAP's hands; as such, it has been a crucial hub for the NA in the area. With the capture of the Sambisa Forest and the integration into its ranks of at least several hundred JAS defectors, not to mention their collective weaponry and material resources, the power balance in the far north of Nigeria could quickly change—if it has not already.

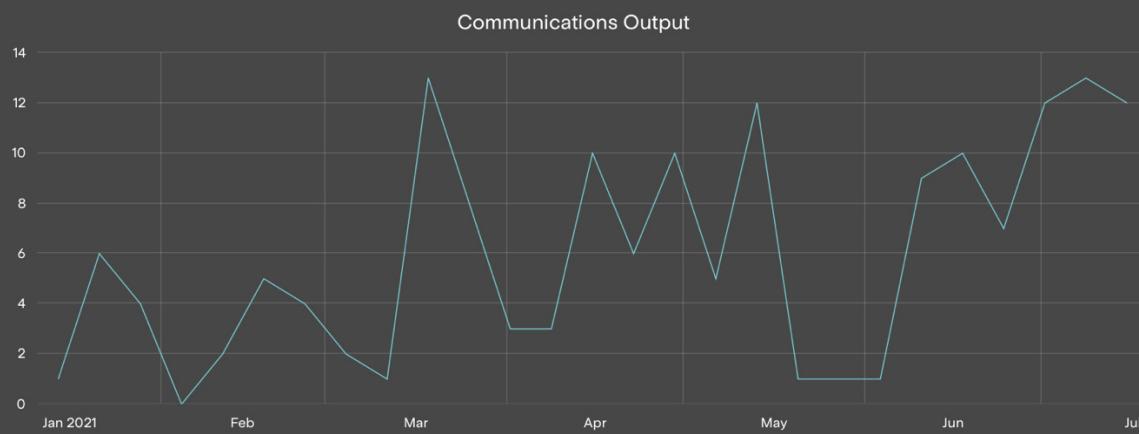


Figure 16. ISWAP comms output, January 2021 to July 2021.

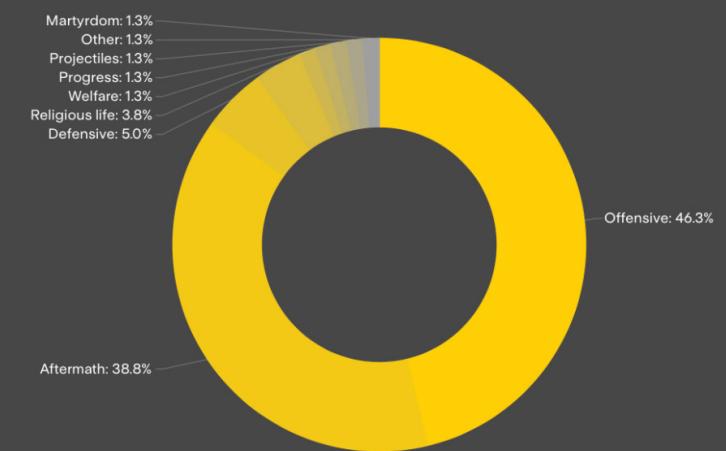


Figure 17. Thematic focus of ISWAP comms output,

Besides its activities in the northeastern corner of Borno state, ISWAP has also doubled down in the Alagarno Forest in the southwest of late. Having warded off the NA's Operation Tura Takai Banga in January, as mentioned above, it has continued to use its territories there as a launching point for major attacks both westwards into Yobe state and eastwards into Borno state. The Sambisa Forest campaign, for example, was launched from the Alagarno Forest. Its ultimate success there means that ISWAP's ability to deploy attacks along the Maiduguri-Damboa-Biu and Biu-Buni Yadi-Damaturu axes has increased very significantly.

Critically, ISWAP's latest successes do not just affect Daesh locally. Its inroads have been playing out globally, bolstering the group's international insurgency as a whole. The broad state of strategic ascendancy to which the defeat of JAS speaks has been broadcast far and wide by Daesh's Central Media Diwan and met with great enthusiasm by its *munasirin*. This has manifested in a surge in ISWAP-focused and ISWAP-produced content that itself is being used as an 'evidence base' for a new period of strategic victory for Daesh.

This surge in content was taken to the next level when, on 24 July—that is, just a few weeks after the last major ISWAP feature video was published—Daesh-Central published a new video from the Lake Chad Basin focusing on what civilian life was like in ISWAP territories. As the first overtly utopian propaganda video published by Daesh since 2018, its release was a momentous occasion not just for ISWAP locally, but for Daesh as a global movement too. Through it, more than at any other point in its history, Daesh's Central Media Diwan was proclaiming ISWAP to be the inheritor of its failed caliphate project in Iraq and Syria.

On that basis, ISWAP's recent triumphs in Nigeria should not be seen as being confined to Nigeria; rather, they are part and parcel of Daesh's overarching ability to maintain operational momentum on a global basis.



Figure 18. Still from ISWAP video, 'Id al-Nahr.' Published 24 July 2021.

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