

MP-IDSA *Background*

Evolving Threat of Transnational Terrorism in Africa

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Summary

More than twenty years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, countering the scourge of terrorism remains a global priority, but the terrorist threat today is fundamentally different from what the world faced on 9/11. Terrorism today is increasingly transnational, geographically dispersed and ideologically diverse. The emergence of Al-Qaeda of Iraq, and the Islamic State, and the cataclysmic consequences are still fresh in the memory of many, as it should be for security analysts, practitioners, and decision makers dealing with counter-terrorism and radicalisation. As the echo of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State's activities from West Asia seem to have converged, the central African countries and now greater Sahara region have become a new favourable ground for Islamic State perpetrators and extremists. Over the years, Salafi-Jihadi Groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al-Shabaab in Somalia, which are loosely affiliated with Al-Qaeda and now Islamic State, have been harbouring violence, posing threat to human security, and political stability in vast regions of Africa. This backgrounder is an attempt to understand, trace, and analyse the evolving nature of transnational terrorism, modus operandi, and security threats posed by the two infamous terrorist organisations of Africa namely, Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram with their various factions due to their transnational classification.

Transnational terrorism involves acts of terrorism by organisations operating independent of sovereign states. These organisations have a regional as well as global reach and are overtly autonomous. For a long period, it has been a major concern at the global level. As per Dr Stewart Patrick, Director of International Institutions and Global Governance programme at the Council on Foreign Relations, “Transnational terrorism is a unique subset of terrorism with a distinct profile, the members of such organization have several unique characteristics with operational capabilities in multiple countries involving a variety of ethnic, and national backgrounds”.¹ In his book titled *Weak Links: Fragile States, Global Threats and International Security*, he offers a comprehensive view on the dreadful consequences of transnational terrorism in world arena. Further, he adds “Weak and impoverished states and ungoverned areas are susceptible to exploitation by the terrorists”.² These hardliner terrorist organisations exploit local insurgencies with ideologies focusing on the transformation of international order or shift in political power. Moreover, their recruitment and operational abilities are meticulously organised in decentralised nodes, which gives them an added advantage. Their goals and objectives are global in scope and spread across many regions such as Horn of Africa and now in Greater Sahara Region. They plan and adopt violent methods of attacks across the national and international borders, with locally arranged logistics targeting civilians and government forces.³ As mentioned earlier, Al-Shabaab (AS) and Boko Haram (BH) are two major Salafi-Jihadi Groups (SJGs) that are operating in the vast continent of Africa today, and are not only transnational but also play a significant role in the global Salafi-Jihadi activity.

Al-Shabaab

Harkat ash-Shabaab al Mujahidiin or AS, ‘youth’ in Arabic, is an active-armed and politicised group, which operates within the Horn of Africa (Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia). Al-Shabaab is considered to be an ally or affiliate of Al-Qaeda.⁴ An offshoot of Somalia’s Islamic Court Union (ICU), it evolved from a clan community driven Islamic Jihad Movement inspired by Somali Islamic scholars and spiritual leaders trained in Saudi Arabia as Wahhabi sect followers.⁵ It was established during the Somali Civil War which began with the overthrow of the former Somali President Siad Barre in 1991. Al-Shabaab operates with multiple cells which are generally decentralised with no specific written or declared agenda other than creating and

¹ Stewart Patrick, [*Weak Links: Fragile States, Global Threats and International Security*](#), Oxford University Press, 2011.

² Ibid.

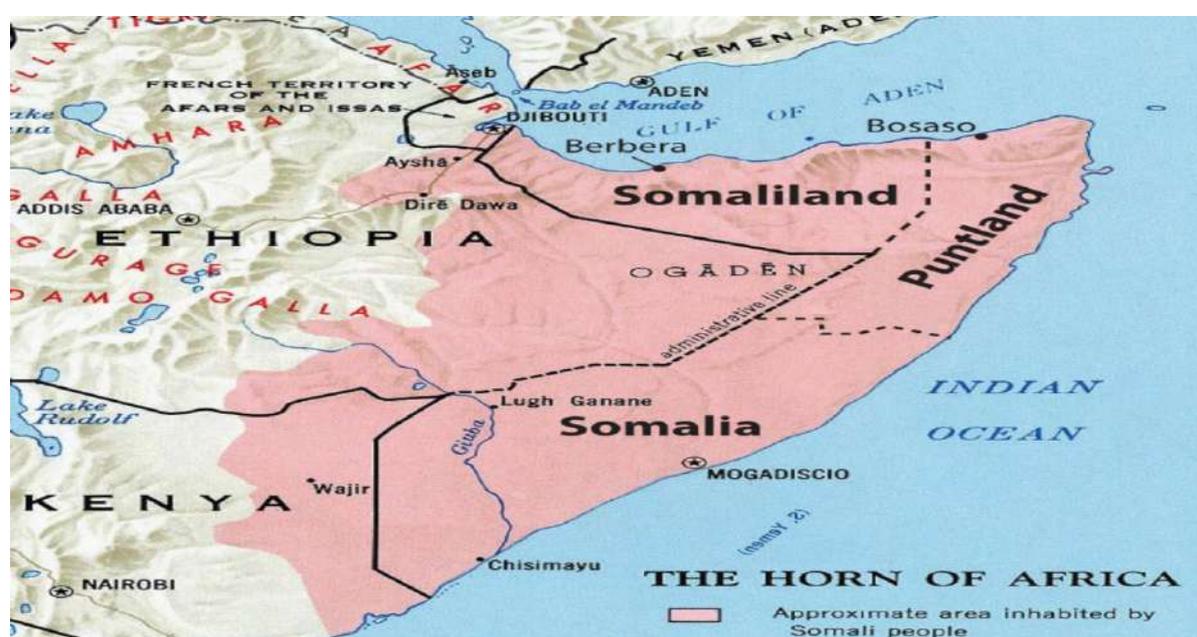
³ Ibid.

⁴ [**"Mapping Militant Organizations-Al Shabaab"**](#), Stanford University.

⁵ David Last and Anthony Seaboyer, [**"Clan and Islamic Identities in Somali Societies"**](#), Defence Research and Development Canada, November 2011.

imposing strict Wahhabi doctrine in Somalia, and with the express aim of expanding it to the rest of Horn of Africa, and eventually into various corners of Africa.⁶ Around 95 per cent of its leadership, rank and profile are from the central region, adopting destructive methods of committing violent attacks, targeting civilian infrastructure and government establishments.⁷ AS has created a nucleus of Wahhabi sect stronghold in Somalia that would create an Islamic state of the Somali caliphate.⁸ In 2000s, Al-Ittihad Al-Islami (AIAI), another grass-root level off-shoot of Al-Shabaab, sought a 'greater Somalia' claiming territories of Kenya, Ethiopia, and strategic Djibouti under fundamentalist Islamic rule;⁹ a projection of territory which had already been laid out by the British colonial era in 1930s.¹⁰ Map 1 shows the territories claimed by AIAI, and the area inhabited by the Somali ethnic groups of Islamic faith within the Horn of Africa.

Map 1. Territories claimed by AIAI



Source: Natacha Perrin Et Jules Palleschi, [“Chaos in Somalia: The Secrets of a Multifactorial Widespread Crisis”](#), *Le Journal International*, 10 July 2020.

⁶ Caleb Weiss, [“Kenyan Governor Claims Shabaab Controls Over Half of North-eastern Kenya”](#), *Long War Journal*, 16 January 2021.

⁷ Claire Felter, Jonathan Masters and Mohamad Aly Sergei, [“Al Shahab”](#), *Council on Foreign Relations*, 19 May 2021.

⁸ Matt Bryden, [“The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab - A Strategy of Choice or Necessity?”](#), *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, February 2014.

⁹ [“Mapping Militant Organizations - Al Ittihad Al Islamiyah”](#), Stanford University Press.

¹⁰ Natacha Perrin Et Jules Palleschi, [“Chaos in Somalia - The Secrets of Multifactorial Widespread Crisis”](#), *Le Journal International*, 10 July 2020.

Logistical and Operational Support: Unlike other terrorist organisations, AS's terror financing is a local loop, community-based grass-root support structure that helps active fighters, and AS recruiters to carry out violent operations. Local mosque, religious leaders, and community networks provide a bulk of long-term financial support to AS's logistical and operational needs.¹¹ Cases of abduction of ordinary Somali businessmen for ransom have also been reported over time.¹² Moreover, it takes advantage of Somalia's political vacuum bringing in millions of dollars per year. Reportedly, Al-Shabaab has built up a local channel of cartels to impose illegal levy on traded charcoal, despite a UN ban on Somali charcoal exports since 2012 under UNSC Resolution 2498.¹³ The group also profits from smuggling contraband sugar across the Kenyan border. In 2019, the United Nations reported that, Al-Shabaab spent US\$ 21 million on fighters, weapons, and intelligence, and that the group enjoys a sizable budgetary surplus.¹⁴

Clandestine Weapons and Ammunitions: The Al-Shabaab operatives import illegal arms via disputed land border between Somaliland and Puntland, an autonomous federal state in north eastern Somalia since 1998. AS also exploits porous maritime borders of Djibouti, and the Gulf of Aden, which is patrolled by Puntland coastal guards.¹⁵ Al-Shabaab reportedly maintains business links with smugglers in south Yemen governorates, where illegal arms trade is rife due to the civil war in the country, and uses front businesses based in Somalia and Kenya to make payments to arms sellers in Yemen.¹⁶ However, current monitoring of money sent to Yemen from Somalia has been partially curtailed due to international sanctions, but a lot has to be done to have a holistic approach to thwart terrorist movements and illegal activities.

Boko Haram

In 2002, Boko Haram (BH) or Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah Lidda'wati wal-Jihād (JAS) was founded by Mohammed Yusuf, a Wahhabi sect follower from Maiduguri, capital of Borno state, Nigeria.¹⁷ Initially, the organisation focused on imparting education, later Md. Yusuf established a city complex which included a mosque and a religious

¹¹ Abdisaid M. Ali, "[The Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahidiin – A Profile of the First Somali Terrorist Organisation](#)", ISPSW.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "[UNSC Pursuant to Resolution 751 \(1992\) Concerning Somalia](#)", United Nations Security Council.

¹⁴ Claire Felter, Jonathan Masters and Mohammed Aly Sergei, No. 7.

¹⁵ "[Al - Shabaab Militias 'Smuggle' Small Arms from Somaliland](#)", *The Puntland Post*, 9 December, 2020.

¹⁶ Guyo Chepe Turi, "[Violent Extremists Find Fertile Ground in Kenya's Isiolo County](#)", *Institute for Security Studies*, 8 October 2020.

¹⁷ "[Boko Haram](#)", The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, USA.

study group. In the early years, BH considered the Nigerian government as an opponent but at the same time it officially opposed violence.¹⁸ The group believed in delaying Jihad until the group was strong enough to overthrow the existing Nigerian government.¹⁹ This took a violent turn in 2009, when a dispute erupted between Nigerian authorities and BH members leading to the storming of BH complex. The raid reportedly killed 700 people including the BH founder Md. Yusuf.²⁰ Following the incident, in the same year, BH or JAS pledged its allegiance to Al-Qaeda of Iraq (AQI) in 2009 under Abu Bakar Sekhau,²¹ and began to target government forces and civilians to impose strict Islamic rule in northern Nigeria.²² Notably, a sharp increase of Boko Haram targeting Muslim communities along with other local Nigerian ethnicities, resulted in a split in 2011, with the creation of Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Nigeria.²³ Since then, BH and ISWAP have managed to take control of the vast Lake Chad region. Interestingly, the non-cooperative nature of relationship between these two organisations and among other armed groups often ended with violent clashes.²⁴ Terrorist organisations and other non-state actors routinely exploit this route of Lake Chad for smuggling of illegal arms and illicit drug trafficking, and is also considered to be a hub of almost daily attacks.²⁵ The region around Lake Chad, which encompasses vast territory of four countries—Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger—has been a bone of contention among them. The ethnic communities such as Fulani and Hausa have been fighting for land usage rights often involving conflicting claims. Further, the presence of many natural and mineral resources has aggravated the conflict as it has drawn many powerful interest groups to the arena.

Present security situation of Nigeria: On 26 July 2021, the death of Abu Bakar Sekhau, a notorious BH leader has once again created a power vacuum in the central leadership of BH or JAS, but the overall impact is yet to be seen.²⁶ On the other hand,

¹⁸ Nathaniel D. F. Allen, "[Unusual Lessons from an Unusual War: Boko Haram and Modern Insurgency](#)", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 4, 2017, p. 119.

¹⁹ Titilope F. Ajayi, "[Book Review: Alexander Thurston, Boko Haram - The History of African Jihadist Movement](#)", *African Studies Review*, 2020.

²⁰ "[Boko Haram: Emerging Threat to the U.S. Homeland](#)", Report-2001, US Government Printing Office, December 2011.

²¹ "[Boko Haram](#)", Office of the Director of National Intelligence, DNI, USA.

²² Abimbola Adesoji, "[The Boko Haram Uprising and Islamic Revivalism in Nigeria](#)", *Africa Spectrum*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2010.

²³ Jacob Zenn, "[Boko Haram's Factional Feuds: Internal Extremism and External Interventions](#)", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2019.

²⁴ "[Nigeria's Boko Haram Pledges Allegiance to Islamic State](#)", *BBC News*, 7 March 2015.

²⁵ Thomas E. Griffin, "[Lake Chad: Changing Hydrography, Violent Extremism, and Climate-Conflict Intersection](#)", Marine Corps University, 2020.

²⁶ "[Abubakar Shekau: Nigeria's Boko Haram Leader is Dead, Say Rival Militants](#)", *BBC News*, 28 July 2021.

throughout the beginning of the year 2019, the ISWAP leadership started encouraging cross-border insurgencies in Mali and Burkina Faso,²⁷ although both the countries are considered to be under the operational area for other IS-affiliated groups such as Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jamā'at Nusrat ul-Islam al-Muslimin (JNIM).²⁸ Currently, ISWAP's leadership is in transition due to the death of Abu Musab al-Barnawi²⁹ (son of Md. Yusuf), who earlier played a significant role to promote Islamic State of Greater Sahara (ISGS) activities under ISWAP brand since 2019. Experts believe that ISWAP aims to expand its territorial influence from Burkina Faso in the west to the east of Cameroon.³⁰

In 2020–21, Northern Nigeria has recorded the highest number of political violence and attacks. After the city of Maiduguri (Borno, origin of BH), Chibok, Katsina and Zamfara, now the state of Kaduna is witnessing a tripling of violent incidents involving armed conflicts, kidnappings, and highway robbery (see Map 2).³¹ At present, Nigeria's fifth largest state of Kaduna with an approximate population of 11,38,023, and urban settlements with critical infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, museums, and stadiums along with Nigeria's elite defence establishment Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA) are at high risk due to violent attacks such as kidnappings, suicide bombings and armed attacks.³² Experts believe that Nigeria is facing an evolving security crisis due to overlapping of threats, and challenges from the home-grown terrorist organisations and other armed groups. With the increased number of terror incidents, the Nigerian government has taken several measures to thwart the rising threat of armed extremism and attacks within its territory, especially the areas bordering the Lake Chad region, by establishing a Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) which involves local villagers, local state police, army and air force. Often, lack of training, equipment, and limited operational synergy between the forces has been reported.³³ Sea piracy on the Gulf of Guinea, and the threats from the armed gangs engaged in illicit drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and kidnappings are the other major challenges.³⁴

²⁷ Jason Warner, Rayan O'Farrell, Heni Nsaibia and Ryan Cummings, "[Outlasting the Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State Threat in Africa](#)", *Combating Terrorism Centre*, November/December 2020, Vol. 13, No. 11.

²⁸ Daniel Eizenga and Wendy Williams, "[The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel](#)", *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 1 December 2020.

²⁹ "[Nigeria Says Iswap Leader Abu Musab al-Barnawi is Dead](#)", *BBC News*, 14 October 2021.

³⁰ "[Boko Haram](#)", No. 17.

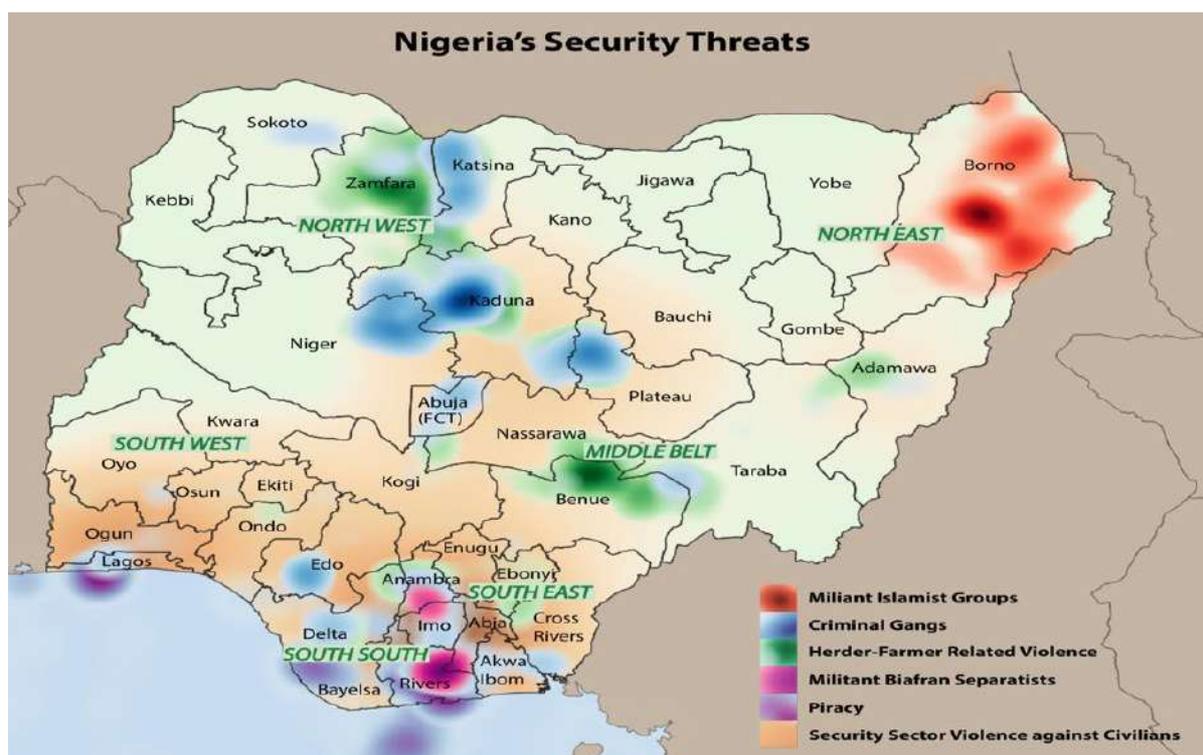
³¹ "[Northeast Nigeria Insurgency has Killed almost 350,000 - UN](#)", *Reuters*, 24 June 2021.

³² "[NDA Kaduna Attack: Nigeria Defence Academy Suffer Banditry and Kidnapping Attacks](#)", *BBC News*, 25 August 2021.

³³ Olajumoke (Jumo) Ayandele, "[Confronting Nigeria's Kaduna Crisis](#)", *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 2 February 2021.

³⁴ "[Pirates are Kidnapping More Seafarers Off West Africa, IMB Reports](#)", *International Chamber of Commerce*, 14 October 2020.

Map 2. Nigeria's Security Threats



Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project; National Geo-spatial-intelligence Agency Maritime Safety, Information; see Mark Duerksen, [“Nigeria’s Diverse Security Threats”](#), Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 30 March 2021.

Conclusion

Al- Shabaab and Boko Haram (including ISWAP) signify a persistent threat of transnational terrorism in Africa. The organisations of similar nature pose an enormous challenge for the security, and stability of African nations as well as rest of the world, as these terror organisations with such transnational characteristics may prevent states to focus on a specific area of development. By analysing the characteristics of terrorist activities with reference to Africa, we can reduce the potential threats to other countries which may face such terrorist organisations since they are not confined to national borders.

About the Author

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