



Governing Without a State: ISWAP's Model for the Lake Chad Basin

Dr. Oge Samuel Okonkwo, Founder and Research Director, Sahel Consulting Solutions

BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) governs parts of the Lake Chad Basin through taxation, religious policing, and dispute resolution rather than through indiscriminate violence. After the Islamic State demoted Abubakar Shekau in 2016 and installed Abu Musab al-Barnawi as governor, ISWAP built a functioning revenue and service system around the fishing, rice, dried meat, and pepper trades, deliberately rejecting Shekau's predatory rule (Zenn 2020, 276, 289–290). This governance model has produced measurable local toleration and now underpins ISWAP's position as Nigeria's deadliest armed group, with attacks rising 360 percent in 2025 (Global Terrorism Index 2026, 23). Counter-ISWAP strategy must therefore target the group's taxation and service infrastructure directly, not only its fighters, while expanding genuine state service delivery into contested Lake Chad communities.

AT A GLANCE

- ISWAP formed in August 2016, after the Islamic State demoted Abubakar Shekau and named Abu Musab al-Barnawi the group's wali, or governor, of West Africa (Zenn 2020, 276).
- ISWAP taxes the Lake Chad fishing, rice, dried meat, and pepper trades to fund its operations (Zenn 2020, 289–290).
- Religious police, known as hisba, patrol ISWAP-controlled markets and assist farmers as part of a deliberate “hearts and minds” strategy (Zenn 2020, 290).
- ISWAP's leadership accused Shekau of hoarding food from starving civilians to justify its own rival claim to legitimate governance (Zenn 2020, 279).
- ISWAP has created additional semi-autonomous provinces, or wilayat, since 2021 to administer its expanding Lake Chad territory (Global Terrorism Index 2026, 60).
- ISWAP attacks rose 360 percent in 2025, from 20 to 92, making it Nigeria's deadliest armed group (Global Terrorism Index 2026, 23).

CONTEXT

Boko Haram emerged in Maiduguri in the early 2000s and launched an armed uprising in 2009 under Mohammed Yusuf (Campbell 2011, 54). Borno State's porous borders with Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, combined with a weak federal government presence, created conditions in which an insurgent movement could operate largely unchecked (Campbell 2011, 46, 60). Under Abubakar Shekau's later leadership, the group turned toward indiscriminate violence against civilians, security forces, and symbols of the state (Matfess 2017, 23–24).

In March 2015, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and adopted the name Islamic State West Africa Province (Global Terrorism Index 2026, 58). The pledge did not resolve internal disputes over strategy. In August 2016, the Islamic State sided against Shekau, naming Abu Musab al-Barnawi the group's wali, or governor, and effectively demoting its founder (Thurston 2018, 276; Zenn 2020, 276). Al-Barnawi publicly distanced the new ISWAP leadership from attacks on ordinary Muslim civilians, describing such people as innocent rather than legitimate targets (Thurston 2018, 277).

This split produced two rival factions operating across the same Lake Chad Basin geography. Shekau's faction continued a pattern of predation, while ISWAP pursued territorial control through governance rather than terror alone (Zenn 2020, 289).



ANALYSIS

ISWAP's governance rests on an administrative structure borrowed from the Islamic State's core model. Each territorial node is headed by a wali, the Ottoman-derived term for governor that the Islamic State uses across its global affiliates (Zenn 2020, 263). ISWAP deploys hisba officials to monitor markets, enforce Islamic law, and oversee public gatherings such as Eid prayers (Zenn 2020, 273, 290). The Islamic State's own Syria and Iraq template, built around local councils for finance, military affairs, and compliance with Islamic law, supplies the organizational logic that its affiliates across West Africa were built to replicate (Byman 2015, 174–175).

The clearest evidence of ISWAP's governance system is its taxation of Lake Chad commerce. ISWAP raises funds by taxing the fishing, rice, dried meat, and pepper trades that move along the lake's shoreline and islands, a system that is not incidental (Zenn 2020, 289–290). Cells operating on the Lake Chad shore before the formal 2016 split were already described as more commercially oriented than ideological, controlling the fish and pepper trade (Matfess 2017, 27). ISWAP formalized this commercial control into a structured tax regime once it consolidated territorial administration.

Nigeria's military response has often undercut its own counter-insurgency position. When the army attempted to ban the taxed trades, it alienated local traders rather than weakening ISWAP, because goods that ISWAP taxed were then seized and destroyed by Nigerian forces, leaving traders penalized twice over (Zenn 2020, 289–290). A state response focused only on denial, without offering an alternative market or protection, can reinforce the comparative predictability of insurgent taxation over state enforcement.

ISWAP's governance claim also depends on a doctrinal distinction that justified the 2016 split in the first place. ISWAP's founding generation, including Mamman Nur, accused Shekau of abusing his position for personal gain, of hoarding food while civilians starved, and of exploiting women and captives under his control (Zenn 2020, 279). Abu Musab al-Barnawi argued that internally displaced people and civilians holding national identity documents had not demonstrated loyalty to the Nigerian state merely by needing food, medicine, and shelter, a position that justified governing such people rather than punishing them (Zenn 2020, 280). This doctrinal reasoning, not only tactical calculation, underwrote ISWAP's shift toward service provision.

The resulting local perception gap is measurable. Civilians in ISWAP-administered areas described its fighters as professionals who provided religious instruction and inspected markets, a reputation that contrasted with Shekau's forces, who looted markets and mutilated civilian women accused of collaborating with Cameroon's army (Zenn 2020, 289). When ISWAP fighters entered Babangida, Yobe State, in September 2019, they reportedly remained to exchange pleasantries with residents, an indicator of localized toleration rather than open resistance (Zenn 2020, 290).

Even Shekau's own camp had cultivated a governance narrative of its own. Youths interviewed before the split described Shekau as a providing figure, comparing him to a governor (Matfess 2017, 29–30). ISWAP's leadership explicitly rejected this framing, arguing that Shekau's claim to govern was contradicted by his hoarding of food and abuse of civilians under his control (Zenn 2020, 279). The split therefore turned on a contest over which faction's claim to govern was credible, not only over tactics.

This governance model is not static. Since Shekau's death in 2021, ISWAP has expanded its administrative footprint, creating additional semi-autonomous wilayat within the Lake Chad region to manage growing territory (Global Terrorism Index 2026, 60). In the three months after Shekau's death, the rival faction he once led, known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal Jihad (JAS), saw its share of civilian fatalities in Borno State fall from 43 percent to 4 percent, while ISWAP's share rose correspondingly (Global Terrorism Index 2026, 60). Governance capacity, not only battlefield strength, now distinguishes ISWAP from its rivals.

CASE EXAMPLE: THE DAPCHI SCHOOLGIRLS RETURN, 2018

In February 2018, ISWAP fighters abducted more than one hundred schoolgirls from a boarding school in Dapchi, Yobe State. Weeks later, under reported direction from the Islamic State's central leadership, ISWAP returned the girls through a negotiated arrangement, and villagers reportedly applauded their return (Zenn 2020, 292–293). The episode shows that ISWAP's central leadership treated civilian reputation as a governance asset. Rather than treating the abduction purely as a battlefield tactic, the



leadership corrected a decision that threatened to undermine the legitimacy its hearts and minds strategy depended on.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF): Prioritize disrupting ISWAP's taxation nodes along fishing and trade routes rather than relying solely on kinetic clearance operations, which the evidence shows alienate traders without reducing ISWAP's revenue base (Zenn 2020, 289–290).
2. Preventing violent extremism (PVE) donors: Fund alternative market access and trade protection schemes so that Lake Chad communities are not forced to choose between ISWAP taxation and Nigerian military seizure of the same goods (Zenn 2020, 289–290).
3. Nigerian federal and Borno State governments: Extend functioning justice, market oversight, and agricultural support services into contested Lake Chad communities to compete directly with ISWAP's hisba and dispute-resolution functions (Zenn 2020, 290; Global Terrorism Index 2026, 60).
4. Embassies and diplomatic missions: Track ISWAP's internal leadership dynamics following Shekau's 2021 death, since governance-oriented factions have historically diverged sharply from predatory ones within the same movement (Zenn 2020, 279–280).
5. Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS): Incorporate civilian toleration patterns, such as localized non-resistance to ISWAP's presence, into regional early-warning frameworks as an indicator of governance consolidation that requires intervention before local legitimacy entrenches further (Zenn 2020, 290).

RISK OUTLOOK

ISWAP's governance model is deepening, not weakening. Since 2021, the group has created additional wilayat to administer its expanding Lake Chad territory, and in 2025 its attacks rose 360 percent, from 20 to 92, while deaths more than doubled, from 166 to 384 (Global Terrorism Index 2026, 23, 60). Nigeria's use of Super Tucano light attack aircraft to repel an ISWAP assault on Damboa in May 2025 shows the group can now mount conventional-style offensives against fortified positions (Global Terrorism Index 2026, 61). ISWAP has also adopted drones for surveillance and explosives, reportedly with foreign trainers (Global Terrorism Index 2026, 61).

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) found that violent extremist groups across the Lake Chad subregion increasingly resemble proto-states, exploiting state fragility and aligning with local leaders and inter-communal disputes to recruit (UNDP 2023, 50). As climate pressure on Lake Chad's shrinking water and farmland resources continues, ISWAP's taxation and service system gives it a durable recruitment and revenue advantage over a Nigerian state response still weighted toward denial rather than service delivery.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

This brief draws exclusively on Sahel Consulting Solutions' uploaded source library. The anchoring source is Jacob Zenn, *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2020), chapter 10, “The Islamic State in West Africa Province.” Supporting sources include Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Hilary Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses* (London: Zed Books, 2017); Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); John Campbell, *Nigeria: Dancing on the Brink* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011); the Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2026*; and the United Nations Development Programme, *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement* (2023).



ABOUT SAHEL CONSULTING SOLUTIONS

Sahel Consulting Solutions is a conflict analysis and political risk consultancy led by Dr. Oge Samuel Okonkwo, a historian holding a PhD from the University of Ghana and an MSc in Defence and Strategic Studies from the Nigerian Defence Academy. The firm specializes in comparative analysis of Igbo separatism and Nigeria's Northeast jihadist insurgency, advising ECOWAS, the African Union, and PVE donors. Contact: sahelconsultingsolutions@gmail.com, +234 816 732 1000.