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FEATURE ARTICLE

Understanding Jihadi Expansion and Diffusion in Nigeria

James Barnett and Umar Musa

FEATURE COMMENTARY

Red Teaming Hamas' Options

Brian Michael Jenkins

Contents

FROM THE EDITORS

In December 2025, the United States reported that it had launched strikes against Islamic State fighters in northwest Nigeria, specifically in Sokoto state near the border with Niger. Our cover article this month—based on extensive fieldwork by the authors—provides meticulous, new insights into jihadi expansion in this part of Nigeria. James Barnett and his co-author find that "jihadis tend to expand into regions that are impacted by banditry (which is rampant in rural Nigeria) yet simultaneously not dominated by any overly powerful bandit leaders"—what the authors term the "Goldilocks effect." Furthermore, they observe that "jihadis try to expand in areas where the commanders have existing social or religious ties, and these ties are typically more important for gaining new recruits than appeals to factional affiliation per se." These conclusions help clarify the complex, often nuanced security situation in Nigeria.

In our feature commentary, Brian Michael Jenkins uses a red team approach to examine different strategies that Hamas may pursue during the next phase of the Gaza peace plan. He puts forth three possible options the group may pursue: a confrontational approach, a peaceful pathway, and a flexible, more opportunistic strategy. In examining each of these in turn, Jenkins reminds us that "terrorist strategic planning may be determined by factors other than conventional military calculations or sensitivity to the prospect of catastrophic losses that would deter most political leaders."

In light of recent terrorist threats against elected officials in Europe, Thomas Renard considers whether we are witnessing the beginning of a new era of political violence against government representatives. He finds that while there is a persistent threat, "the data does not allow one to conclude that the phenomenon is rising in Europe. However, it is occurring in a broader context that could result in a growing trend of political assassinations in the future."

Finally, Tanya Mehra and Merlina Herbach explore disparities in how European criminal justice systems prosecute minors and young adults involved in terrorist activities. Using a dataset of 98 cases from Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (2020 to mid-2025) and through close examination of "the legal frameworks and sentencing practices for juvenile extremist offenders (JEOs) aged 10 to 23," they find that "most JEOs are convicted of preparatory offenses or possession and dissemination of extremist material rather than violent acts" and "most JEOs receive custodial sentences (69 percent), often with probation and deradicalization requirements."

Don Rassler and Kristina Hummel, *Editors-in-Chief*

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Cover: Nigeria army patrols along the Kaduna Birnin Gwari area in Nigeria on March 8, 2024, following the abduction of nearly 300 children from their school a day earlier. (Sunday Alamba/AP Photo)

Kachallas and Kinship: Understanding Jihadi Expansion and Diffusion in Nigeria

By James Barnett and Umar Musa*

The multiplication and diffusion of jihadi networks within Nigeria is an important component of the broader spread of jihadi violence from the Sahel into coastal West Africa, a trend that has caused significant international concern. Yet, an understanding of the factors that facilitate or impede jihadi expansion in Nigeria, and Africa more broadly, remains limited and often unnuanced. Drawing on extensive fieldwork and interviews with non-state actors, the authors analyze how different jihadi groups, including various factions of Nigeria's "Boko Haram" insurgency as well as so-called "Lakurawa" militants from neighboring Niger, have each attempted to expand into northwestern, central, and southern Nigeria over the past five years. In detailing these efforts, some failed and others successful, two key trends are identified. First, jihadis tend to expand into regions that are impacted by banditry (which is rampant in rural Nigeria) yet simultaneously not dominated by any overly powerful bandit leaders. The authors dub this the "Goldilocks effect" to reflect how jihadis seek areas with an 'optimal' level of banditry so that they can reap certain benefits from bandits without risking confrontation with powerful warlords. Second, jihadis try to expand in areas where the commanders have existing social or religious ties, and these ties are typically more important for gaining new recruits than appeals to factional affiliation per se. The authors demonstrate this through a case study of Kogi state in central Nigeria, where both Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Ansaru (an al-Qa`ida-aligned faction) have recruited from the same local religious networks.

In November 2024 and April 2025, respectively, Nigerian and international media reported with consternation the emergence of two new terrorist groups operating in the country's northwestern and north-central states,[a] known as "Lakurawa"[1] and the "Mahmuda group,"[2] respectively. Neither of the groups were exactly "new," however. Lakurawa—a local Hausa term for militants from neighboring Sahel states—had been making incursions into communities in Nigeria's Sokoto state near the Nigerien border since late 2017, while the group led by "Mallam Mahmuda" had operated in central Nigeria near the border with Benin since approximately 2020. Indeed, when Nigerian authorities arrested Mahmuda in August 2025, marking one of the country's biggest counterterrorism successes in recent years, the country's national security advisor linked Mahmuda to Ansaru, an early al-Qa`ida-aligned splinter faction of Boko Haram, and said that he had been active in various groups, Nigerian and foreign, for over a decade.[3]

The arrests raised important questions about the evolution of jihadi violence in Nigeria and West Africa more broadly:[b] How are jihadi groups entering 'new' regions? Are Nigerian jihadi groups and groups from the Sahel converging and cooperating? How

a Nigeria is divided into six subnational regions known as geopolitical zones, with the northeast zone being the longstanding hub of the Boko Haram insurgency. This report largely focuses on developments in three other geopolitical zones – known as the northwest, the north central, and the southwest, which the authors collectively refer to as "western Nigeria" in places.

b An article in the Nigerian newspaper *Premium Times* after the arrests did a good job encapsulating some of the confusion and debates among analysts about jihadi groups operating in western Nigeria. See Yakubu Mohammed, "Tracing Al-Qaeda's Footprints in Nigeria: From war-torn Sahel to Nigeria's forest reserves," *Premium Times*, August 20, 2025.

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Umar Musa (pseudonym) is a researcher based in northern Nigeria with extensive fieldwork experience focused on rural insecurity and non-state actors.*

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The authors would like to thank Kars de Bruijne and his colleagues at Clingendael Institute for sharing relevant data on conflict actors as well as ExTrac for making available the use of its data visualization tools. The authors would also like to thank Vincent Foucher, Mathias Khalfaoui, Malik Samuel, and Héni Nsaibia for sharing relevant insights from their research and/or reviewing earlier drafts of this study. All assessments and any mistakes are the authors' alone.

relevant are the remaining veteran commanders of the Boko Haram conflict (now in its second decade[4]) to dynamics today?

As this study argues, the geography of jihadi violence in Nigeria has not been confined to Borno state in the country's northeast, the geographic origin point and longstanding locus of the Boko Haram insurgency, for some time.[c] Nigeria faces threats from various jihadi factions operating in far-flung corners of the country, even as the two main jihadi groups operating in the northeast have also escalated their attacks in 2025, putting hard-won military gains at risk.[5]

Yet to say, as most analysts do, that jihadis have "expanded" into northwestern, central, or even southwestern Nigeria—what the authors broadly refer to as "western" Nigeria for the purposes of this study—is also only partially correct. In some cases, jihadi groups from neighboring Sahelian states—the Islamic State's Sahel Province, and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM, al-Qa`ida's affiliate in the Sahel)—are in the process of establishing or consolidating actual contiguous stretches of free movement and influence across Nigeria's borders, expansion in a truer sense of the word. Yet in other cases, long-dormant Nigerian jihadi cells have been reactivating in locations far removed from any other jihadi-controlled territory or simply relocating to remote patches of forest on the other side of the country. Some of these networks have had significant success in these endeavors, while others have faced setbacks. Examining these jihadi failures alongside the successes, the authors believe, offers important lessons with relevance beyond Nigeria.

This study, based on months of collaborative fieldwork across Nigeria, aims to provide a detailed assessment of the extent to which different Nigerian and Sahelian jihadi groups have either expanded into or relocated within different parts of the country over the past five years. The authors uncover a far more nuanced phenomenon at play than is sometimes depicted in media and analytical reports, although they do not downplay the risks that Nigeria faces of further and more widespread jihadi violence in the coming months and years. In particular, the authors identify two key trends that can help observers and analysts understand where jihadis find success and where they face setbacks.

Key Findings and Primary Arguments

The first finding builds on a previous study by the first author[6] related to the volatile relationship between jihadis and Nigeria's bandits, the latter a powerful and deadly set of militants who dominate swaths of rural northwestern and central Nigeria (albeit highly fragmented among dozens of gangs).[d] The authors find that jihadis appear cognizant of both the benefits that they can achieve by collaborating with bandits as well as the drawbacks—the benefits being financial and operational, the drawbacks being friction with territorial bandit gangs as well as reputational liability in the eyes of the rural communities in northern Nigeria whose loyalty they are trying to earn. Far from seeing bandits as a means of consolidating their insurgent hub,[7] as many analysts and officials have worried for several years, jihadis have probed new areas in northwestern Nigeria and found the most amenable conditions in areas where bandits are present but somewhat weaker in their influence, suggesting that there is a "Goldilocks effect"—areas of equilibrium (some bandits, but not too many) in which jihadis can reap the benefits of banditry without as much of the attendant risk. Relatedly, the authors find that Nigeria's jihadis rarely adopt wholly consistent approaches to banditry, in contrast to neighboring countries in the Sahel where jihadis have been largely successful in mass cooptation of local bandit networks;[8] in Nigeria, the most successful jihadi groups instead aim to strike a balance between selectively cooperating with bandits for tactical gain and fighting other bandits to establish themselves as security providers for neglected rural communities. As will be shown, achieving this balance is difficult. In this regard, this study adds to a growing body of literature on the 'crime-terror nexus' that underscores some of the risks and liabilities that ideological insurgent movements such

Figure 1: Nigeria (Rowan Technology)

c Several scholars have attempted to explain why jihadi violence emerged specifically in Borno state in the northeast as opposed to other parts of northern Nigeria. See, for example, Abubakar K. Monguno and Ibrahim Umar, "Why in Borno? The History, Geography & Sociology of Islamic Radicalization" in Abdul Raufu Mustapha and Kate Meagher eds., *Overcoming Boko Haram: Faith, Society and Islamic Radicalization in Northern Nigeria* (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell & Brewer, 2020), pp. 64-92 and Scott MacEachern, *Searching for Boko Haram: A History of Violence in Central Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

d Nigeria's bandits consist of dozens of well-armed, predominantly ethnic Fulani gangs that engage in kidnapping for ransom, extortion, illegal mining, and other criminal activities, with the major bandit leaders acting as warlords with significant de facto political and economic influence in the rural hinterlands (particularly in northwestern states, including Niger state). For more, see James Barnett, "The Bandit Warlords of Nigeria," New Lines Magazine, December 1, 2021; Kingsley L. Madueke, Olajumoke Ayandele, Lawan Danjuma Adamu, and Lucia Bird, "Armed Bandits in Nigeria," GI-TOC and ACLED, July 2024; and Peer Schouten and James Barnett, "Divided They Rule? The Emerging Banditry Landscape in Northwest Nigeria," Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), DIIS Report 2025, no. 7 (August 2025).

as jihadis may incur by working with criminals.[e]

The second finding reinforces the importance of what one might call the "micro-" and "meso-social" dynamics of jihadi insurgencies in shaping their trajectories of expansion. Much of the analysis on jihadi expansion in Africa focuses on "macro" factors such as porous borders,[9] climate change,[10] or the role of jihadi strategy at a high level,[11] all of which are indeed important elements. However, the present research also underscores the extent to which jihadis typically choose to expand, relocate, or build cells in regions where their commanders have existing social ties, mirroring findings from studies of jihadi group formation, recruitment, and expansion in places such as Indonesia,[12] Somalia,[f] and Iraq and Syria.[13] [g] The expansionary efforts of each of the groups analyzed in this study have typically been overseen by autonomous commanders who rely on kinship, ethnicity, and other shared social networks (sometimes centered around specific mosques and Islamic schools) in their endeavors. The authors demonstrate this through a case study of Kogi state in central Nigeria, where both Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Ansaru have tapped into an important, if long overlooked, local jihadi scene. This extremist 'milieu' in Kogi first emerged in the 1990s with a hyper-local agenda rooted in disputes among different Muslim sects and traditional religion worshippers, with these social networks eventually forming the backbone of respective ISWAP and Ansaru campaigns decades later. Ideological conditions in Kogi were conducive to the emergence of jihadism in the area, as both Ansaru and later ISWAP recruited from a subset of the local salafi community that was, in some ways, already quite radicalized. But the authors argue that social ties are an equally significant part of the story, as personal relationships between members of this community have persisted and, in some cases, transcended the organizational and ideological divisions that would eventually emerge in the Nigerian jihadi scene.

Structure of the Study

The study continues below with a short note on the methodological strengths and limitations of this research. It then offers a brief explanation of Nigeria's geography and ethnoreligious complexity and how this influences jihadi expansion.

The subsequent sections of this study establish its empirical basis through five case studies of jihadi groups/networks that have operated in 'western Nigeria' in recent years. The five principal groups analyzed in this study are as follows:

- **Mahmudawa:** a jihadi group led by a commander, Mallam Mahmuda (real name Abubakar Abba), who was active in Niger and Kwara states as well as parts of Benin between 2020 and 2025
- **JAS:** Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li-Da'wa wal-Jihad, the direct successor to the original "Boko Haram"[h] insurgency begun in 2009, led by Abubakar Shekau until his death in May 2021 and now led by Bakura Doro,[i] which is based in different remote corners of the northeast; the main JAS commander in the northwest is known as Sadiku.
- **ISWAP:** the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), the strongest jihadi group in Nigeria and a provincial affiliate of the Islamic State, which first emerged in a 2015 split with Boko Haram/JAS[14]
- **Ansaru:** Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan ("Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa"), better known as Ansaru, an early al-Qa`ida-affiliated splinter group of Boko Haram/JAS that was active in the early 2010s and has resurfaced in northwestern and north-central Nigeria in recent years; Ansaru seems to have further factionalized in recent years, with one network being active in Kaduna state in 2020-2022 and another centered in Kogi state and southwestern Nigeria in recent years; the factions may have been in the process of reconciling as of early 2025, but there is much conflicting information on the current status of the group(s).
- **"Lakurawa":** the local Nigerian term for militants from Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, most of whom are likely affiliated with the Islamic State's Sahel Province (ISSP) and who have been intermittently active in border regions of northwest Nigeria since 2017

In the section on Mahmuda's group, the authors also provide a shorter analysis of JNIM (Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin), the al-Qa`ida-affiliated group active across the region from northern Mali to Benin that is estimated to be the most powerful jihadi group in West Africa.[15] This group recently claimed its first attacks in Nigeria and appears to have ties with Mahmuda's group, which merits a brief discussion in that section.

In the second half of the study, the authors elaborate on their key arguments regarding the factors behind jihadi expansion in Nigeria: the centrality and complexity of bandit-jihadi relations, and the importance of social and religious ties in building durable

e For example, in his survey of the African jihadi landscape, Stig Jarle Hansen cautions against assuming that jihadis and criminals naturally work together, while Vanda Felbab-Brown shows how the Taliban's early history as an enforcer of sharia law in warlord-dominated Afghanistan influenced its later policies toward the poppy trade. Stig Jarle Hansen, "Into Darkness: Scrutinizing Economic Explanations for African Jihad," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 29 (2021): pp. 23-46; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Pipe Dreams: The Taliban and Drugs from the 1990s into Its New Regime," Small Wars Journal, September 15, 2021. For a broad quantitative survey of the data on the crime-terror nexus, see Brian J. Phillips and Alexander Schiele, "Dogs and Cats Living Together? Explaining the Crime-Terror Nexus," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 36:5 (2023): pp. 699-715.

f Al-Shabaab provides a troubling case study of how insurgents can infiltrate the state (an admittedly disfunctional one in Somalia's case) by leveraging kinship connections to key political elites and exploiting their grievances. See Ken Menkhaus, "Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Somalia Case Study," HMG Stabilisation Unit, February 2018 and Stig Jarle Hansen, "An In-Depth Look at Al-Shabab's Internal Divisions," *CTC Sentinel* 7:2 (2014).

g Similar dynamics are often at play in foreign fighter recruitment to jihadi groups, with foreigners making decisions about which group to join based on the advice and support of friends from their home country who have already relocated to a theater of jihad. This resulted, for example, in different Syrian rebel/jihadi groups receiving recruits in batches formed around friend/family circles back home. See Patrick Haenni and Jerome Drevon, *Transformed by the People: Hayat Tahrir al-Shama's Road to Power in Syria* (London: Hurst, 2025), pp. 22-28.

h At no point in history have these insurgents called themselves "Boko Haram." This name, which translates loosely from Hausa (the lingua franca of northern Nigeria) as "Western education is haram (forbidden)," was initially a pejorative used by the movement's detractors and has since become the popular name among Nigerians and many analysts for Shekau's JAS faction, if not all jihadis in Nigeria. For an early discussion of the group's name and the origins of "Boko Haram," see Andrew Walker, "What Is Boko Haram?" United States Institute of Peace, June 2012.

i The military of Niger claimed to have killed Bakura in an airstrike in August 2025. As of this writing, Bakura's death has not been confirmed, with some researchers reporting that he is alive. See Malik Samuel, "Multiple sources insist that Bakura Doro is alive and well …," X, August 22, 2025.

networks of expansion.

A Note on Methods

This study draws on fieldwork conducted across Nigeria and interviews with key sources who have first- or second-hand information on the dynamics in question. These sources include senior jihadi defectors, former bandits who have collaborated with various jihadis, members of communities that live under jihadi control or influence, security officials who have been tracking these groups, and individuals who have communicated with members of these groups—sometimes extensively—in the course of negotiating (e.g., the release of hostages or the defection of a senior commander), whom the authors refer to in citations as "intermediaries."[j] In this effort, the research team (which includes several anonymous contributors) conducted dozens of interviews and several focus group discussions across 12 states in four of Nigeria's six sub-national regions (geopolitical zones).[k] The authors also leveraged media reports, original open-source research on conflict incidents, data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), as well as propaganda published by different jihadi groups to augment the analysis. For the purposes of visualizing certain conflict incidents and armed group control, the authors also utilized conflict data collected by the Clingendael Institute and ExTrac.[l]

Fieldwork and primary source research on conflict are invariably difficult and pose limitations. This study references secondary literature wherever possible and insofar as such secondary sources seem reliable. However, given the fact that the expansionary efforts of the groups in this study have not been written about in extensive detail, the study relies to a large extent on original interviews and fieldwork. In many cases, the authors were able to independently interview multiple sources with first-hand knowledge of a specific jihadi commander because they had, for example, served under that commander, resided in their camp (for example, as a wife of a fighter), or were a relation or old friend of the individual.[m] While not without their biases or shortcomings, these sources typically provided insights that were specific, detailed, and—when multiple testimonials were compared together—corroboratory. In other cases, the authors struggled to identify sources who were as close to the key individuals in question and instead relied on sources who have interacted with jihadis but may not have as detailed information.[n] The authors have characterized the sources in the endnotes (while maintaining their anonymity) to give a sense of how 'proximate' the sources are to the individual/group in question.

The level of empirical insight into each of these groups is admittedly somewhat uneven: Some groups, such as JNIM, appear to have had an inconsistent presence in Nigeria and thus limited contact with the sources interviewed. Furthermore, the chronology of jihadi networks can be hard to establish with any certainty when relying even on the testimony of former members of these networks, as sources often struggle to remember precise dates from years ago. Consequently, the assessments of certain groups' or individuals' histories herein are vague in places because the authors received contradictory dates for key events, or because their sources would use organizational labels and distinctions that exist today (e.g., Ansaru and ISWAP) to refer to events that predate the emergence of such groups. While cognizant of the limitations of this research, the authors endeavor to present their best assessment of the groups in question.

The Complexity of Identities and Geography in Nigeria

Nigeria unfortunately faces a fluid and diverse array of threats from non-state armed groups, which is reflective of the country's size and complexity. While ethnic and religious identities are as complex in

j Most interviews were conducted in person, while several interviews were conducted by phone. Given the wide geography the authors attempted to cover in their fieldwork, the three authors sometimes each traveled to different locations simultaneously. As such, most of the interviews cited in this study were conducted by one author alone (or with the support of a research assistant/translator) rather than by all three of the authors. With a few exceptions for fellow researchers whom the authors consulted with and who wished to be credited for their insights, the identities of all of the respondents as well as local research assistants are anonymized for safety reasons.

k These states were: Borno (northeast zone); Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Zamfara (northwest zone); Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger (north central zone); Oyo (southwest zone); and the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja). Most fieldwork was conducted between November 2024 and June 2025.

l ExTrac is a U.K.-based decision intelligence company. For more information, see extrac.ai and/or Paul Cruickshank, "A View from the CT Foxhole: Charlie Winter, Co-Founder, ExTrac AI," *CTC Sentinel* 18:4 (2025).

m The authors interviewed several security operatives who have been involved in tracking senior jihadi figures. As a general rule, security sources may have professional or political incentives to limit or skew the information that they provide to researchers (e.g., understating certain threats while overhyping others). However, the authors are keenly aware from their past experiences of how these factors can shape official narratives around insecurity in Nigeria, and some of the security sources who were interviewed acknowledged many of these factors in private. The purpose of these interviews (conducted in such a way as to preserve source anonymity) was to elicit more detailed and nuanced assessments of jihadi group dynamics and expansion than officials would be able to make on the record. Moreover, the authors have only cited interviews with security sources who could provide concrete and specific details about the groups or individuals in question, details that the authors were typically able to corroborate from other sources such as jihadi defectors. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the requests of some sources, certain specific details regarding individuals or operations have been omitted.

n For example, many community members in western Nigeria whom the authors have interviewed had seen jihadis visit their community to, for example, buy supplies, preach to the public, or punish residents for supposed un-Islamic transgressions. However, these community members may have only a vague sense of who the jihadis are – in part a product of the complexity and factionalism of jihadi militancy in the region – and may refer to them by generic labels that may in fact be misleading (e.g., "Boko Haram" or "Yan Ansar," which often gets misreported as Ansaru). In some cases, however, such as communities in Niger or Kaduna states where Sadiku's group operates, the authors found that the jihadis are slightly more integrated into the community or may be more relaxed about operational security, and community members can therefore more confidently identify specific commanders.

Nigeria as anywhere else,[o] they are also inescapable in this analysis, as many armed groups have mobilized around explicit ethnic or religious grievances. Contra simplistic framings of Nigeria as a country merely divided between a Muslim north and a Christian south,[16] the relationship between ethnic and religious identities is much more complex than many analysts—and apparently some jihadis—might assume. If one is to presume that the ultimate objective of jihadis is the "destruction of current Muslim societies through the use of force and creation of what they regard as a true Islamic society"[17] and that jihadis seek to exploit existing social fault lines to do so,[p] then this ethnoreligious complexity is bound to present opportunities, but also plenty of challenges, to jihadis in these strategic efforts.

Importantly, in the northwest, many of Nigeria's bandits are ethnic Fulani herdsmen who claim to have taken up arms as a result of the government's neglect of pastoralist rights amid growing conflict with farming communities (these farmers typically identify as Hausa, although many other ethnic groups reside in states such as Kaduna, Kebbi, or Niger).[18] This is notable insofar as Nigeria's jihadi insurgencies have typically drawn from a different, non-Fulani ethnic base in the country's northeast. Moreover, Nigeria's most destructive bandit gangs largely hail from and operate in Muslim-majority areas in the northwestern states of Zamfara, Sokoto, and Katsina as well as parts of Kaduna, Niger, and Kebbi states (refer to map in previous section). Consequently, Muslim civilians constitute a sizable portion, if not the clear majority, of both the perpetrators and victims of banditry in the northwest.

As this study will show, this simple yet important fact poses a challenge to jihadi groups whose strategies rely on a population-centric insurgency aimed at winning support of vulnerable Muslim communities against the Nigerian state. This lack of shared ethnic identity and differing treatment toward northern Nigeria's Muslim populations have, among other factors, impeded a greater degree of cooperation and convergence between Nigeria's bandits and jihadis to date.[19] By contrast, the two Sahelian jihadi groups of note, ISSP and JNIM, have both successfully exploited Fulani pastoralist grievances in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso and consequently recruited from those communities.[20] It might stand to reason, in that case, that Sahelian groups like "Lakurawa" have had more success recruiting bandits to their cause in the course of expanding into Nigeria than Nigerian jihadis have. But as the authors will show, this has not necessarily been the case.

As such, in most northwestern states like Sokoto and Zamfara, jihadis are, to oversimplify somewhat, inserting themselves into communal conflicts between Muslim ethnicities (Hausa and Fulani). Because both communities are Muslim, jihadis should theoretically prefer to see both sides lay down their arms and join the jihadis in their fight against the Nigerian government. But if this approach does not work, as it often does not, it forces jihadis to effectively pick sides in a complex communal crisis. Because there are benefits and drawbacks to aligning with one side over another and because local conflict dynamics are fluid, jihadis in the northwest typically adopt pragmatic and flexible approaches to the banditry crisis. This forms the first key finding of this study, which the authors will demonstrate through several case studies.

Conversely, in Kogi state in central Nigeria, jihadi networks have formed as a result of intra-Muslim sectarian tension within an ethnic group (the Ebira) in which Muslims and Christians have traditionally coexisted. In other words, if in, for example, Sokoto, jihadis principally navigate ethnic divisions among Muslims, in Kogi (and, increasingly, southwestern Nigeria), they seek to accelerate and exploit religious and sectarian divisions within the same ethnic community. Ebira jihadis in Kogi have had some success in this regard, while still constituting a fringe movement within their community. Thus, despite being geographically far removed and quite socially distinct from the locus of the jihadi insurgency in the northeast, Kogi has become an important launching pad for jihadi expansionary efforts, as detailed in the penultimate section of this article.

The Mahmuda Group

Around 2021, residents in the Borgu emirate[q] that surrounds Kainji Lake National Park in Niger state began to witness armed men traversing the forests outside their communities on motorbikes, occasionally stopping in villages to purchase goods and warn residents against informing the security forces of their presence.[21] Locals could often tell that the militants were not bandits, as these men tended to preach diatribes against local traditional rulers and "non-Islamic" gender norms that were common to the region.[r] The militants did not identify themselves, but eventually, some communities began referring to the group as *Mahmudawa* after its leader, Mallam Mahmuda.[22] Over the next few years, this group gradually moved southward from Niger state into the Kaiama and

o The formation and delineation of ethnic identities and ethnic "homelands," respectively, in the case of Africa were complex and contested historical processes. For somewhat differing views on this topic, see Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018) and Ike Okonta, *When Citizens Revolt: Nigerian Elites, Big Oil and the Ogoni Struggle for Self-Determination* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008). For a review essay covering some recent literature on nationalism and post-colonialism, see also James Barnett, "The Inescapable Nation," Los Angeles Review of Books, May 12, 2021.

p Many studies have shown how jihadis attempt to exploit existing religious or social divisions to recruit and expand. See, for example, Caleb Weiss, *AQIM's Imperial Playbook: Understanding al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb's Expansion into West Africa* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2022). For related analysis regarding the jihadi movement in East Africa, see James Barnett, "The Evolution of East African Salafi-Jihadism," Current Trends in Islamist Ideology, July 2020, and Matt Bryden and Premdeep Bahra, "East Africa's Triple Helix: The Dusit Hotel Attack and the Historical Evolution of the Jihadi Threat," *CTC Sentinel* 12:6 (2019).

q The Borgu kingdom was a powerful pre-colonial state that encompassed the present-day territories of western Benin and Nigeria's Niger and Kwara states. The current Borgu emirate refers to parts of Niger and Kwara states that were once part of this kingdom and continue to fall under the symbolic authority of the Emir of Borgu. Traditional rulers such as emirs do not have formal political authority in contemporary Nigeria but often hold significant informal authority and influence. Because the Mahmuda group operated across both Niger and Kwara states, the Borgu emirate is a useful descriptor for its area of operations. For a historical analysis of pre-colonial Borgu that resonates with the region's contemporary security challenges, see Olayemi Akinwumi, "Princes as Highway Men. A Consideration of the Phenomenon of Armed Banditry in Precolonial Borgu," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 41:162 (2001): pp. 333-350.

r In contrast to other Nigerian jihadi factions, in his audio messages, Mahmuda tended to criticize local cultural practices rather than preaching explicitly against the Nigerian government, democracy, or Western education. In particular, he criticized the practice of women working on farmlands, women's "immodest" fashion, the practice of bathing outside in local rivers, as well as alcohol consumption. Audios and transcripts on file with authors.

Baruten communities in neighboring Kwara state, and eventually as far south as the northern fringes of Old Oyo National Park in Nigeria's southwest, taking advantage of the extensive forest cover connecting Niger, Kwara, and Oyo states.[23] (See Figure 2.)

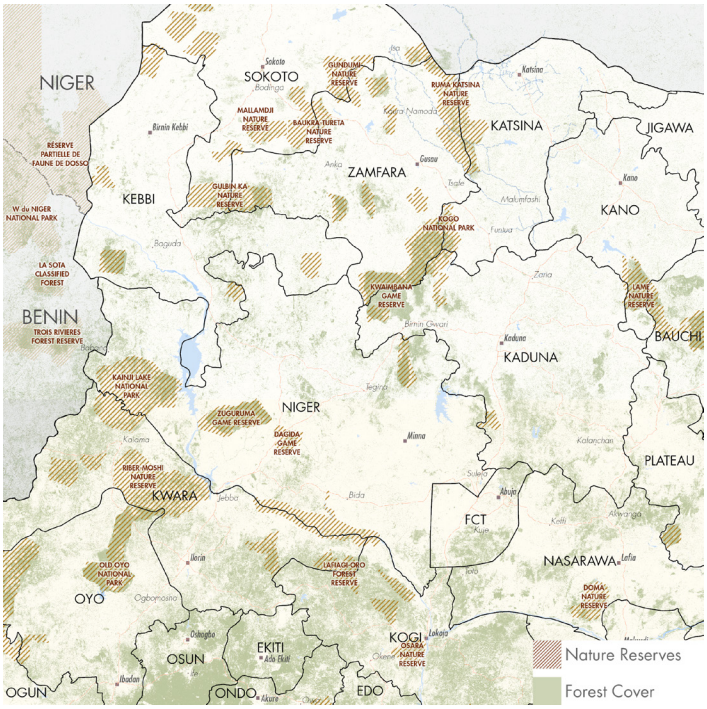

Figure 2: Mahmuda's group has operated across a series of near-contiguous forest reserves that cover parts of three states in western Nigeria (Niger, Kwara, Oyo) near the border with Benin. (Source: Data from Global Forest Watch[24] and the World Database of Protected Areas (WDPA)[25])

The identity and affiliation of Mahmuda's men remain a matter of debate. The data collected from the authors' fieldwork in 2024-2025 strongly suggested that Mahmuda's faction was independent of any other jihadi group and that it could at least partially trace its lineage to a splinter of Darul Salam,[s] an Islamist rejectionist sect[t] that first emerged in Niger state as early as the 1990s (first as a non-violent movement) and later reached a temporary accommodation with the JAS commander Sadiku before being dislodged from Nasarawa in 2020 and splintering further (see subsequent section). However, since Mahmuda's arrest in August 2025 by Nigerian intelligence operatives, the authorities have publicly listed him as the deputy commander of Ansaru subordinate to Abu Baraa (see section on Ansaru for more).[26] [u] The authors have admittedly not seen any concrete evidence that he was previously a member of Darul Salam, although his exact relationship with Ansaru remains equally unclear, and the authors' sources indicate that he knew various factional commanders in Nigeria, suggesting that he may have had fluid alliances or affiliations.

Rather than attempt to provide a definitive assessment of the question of Mahmuda's affiliations at this stage, the authors instead treat him as the leader of an independent group for the purposes of this study, while also recognizing that he has had relationships with other jihadi commanders in Nigeria (and apparently abroad). Mahmuda's group operated with a high degree of autonomy, with Mahmuda himself acting like a local powerbroker in his dealings with communities. It is therefore useful to think of his movement as effectively its own minor insurgency in the western fringes of Niger and Kwara states.

Mahmuda's Emergence and Modus Operandi

Mahmuda is a Hausa from Daura in Katsina state in the country's northwest, the son of a religious and well-respected former ward councilor.[27] Former neighbors from Katsina describe him as smart, honest, and passionate about religion,[28] and Nigerian newspapers have reported that he used to sell audio and video tapes of Islamic preachers, including the late Mohammed Yusuf, founder of the "Boko Haram" insurgency.[29] Precise details of his trajectory within the jihadi orbit are unclear, but his neighbors report that he disappeared from home around 2010 or 2011 after intelligence agents attempted to arrest him, indicating that he was likely an early member of JAS,[30] although he seems to have eventually left the group. Mahmuda reportedly traveled to Somalia, Niger, and Libya at various points in the 2010s,[31] which would indicate that he was likely an early member of Ansaru, which was the more international-oriented faction of Boko Haram.

The precise reasons behind his group's emergence in Niger state around 2021 are unclear, but it is notable that this was a time when various jihadi networks were relocating to or moving around within the broader northwest, including the JAS cell under Sadiku, the Ansaru group under Mala Abba, and possibly militant members of the Darul Salam sect. If Mahmuda knew some of these other networks as well those whom the authors interviewed claim, then he might have sensed an opportunity to establish his own jihadi enclave in western Niger state, a remote region far from other, potential rival groups.

Prior to his arrest, Mahmuda and his brother, Aiman, oversaw a relatively small but influential network that operated across a wide swath of forests and nearby communities (Aiman typically assuming day-to-day management of operations as Mahmuda traveled frequently).[32] Witnesses described Mahmuda as a skilled orator

s An April 2025 report by Nigeria's national center for coordinating early warning and response mechanisms likewise suggested that Mahmuda's group was a resurgence of Darul Salam. See Office for Strategic Preparedness and Resilience (OSPRE), "The Mahmuda Group: The Rising Extremist Threat and Escalating Violence Encircling the Kainji Lake National Park," Office for Strategic Preparedness and Resilience (OSPRE), April 2025.

t The authors draw on Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix's concept of rejectionist Islamists as ones "characterized by a strong focus on ritual practices, a declared disdain for politics, and yet an active rejection of the state and its institutions." The history of Darul Salam and its early rejectionist nature is beyond the scope of this article, and much remains unclear about its transition from being a non-violent sect to jihadism. A forthcoming publication by the first author will provide more insight on the sect's early history and relationship with Sadiku's faction. For more on rejectionist Islamism, see Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix, "Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman Al-'utaybi Revisited," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39:1 (2007): pp. 103-122.

u Some local sources in Kwara and Niger states expressed doubt that the individual arrested by Nigerian authorities was the true "Mahmuda" as they claimed that they had interacted with Mahmuda and that he appeared lighter-skinned, like a foreigner. However, given the details released about Mahmuda to date and the authors' own investigation, it is more likely that the Nigerian authorities arrested the correct leader of the group, and that Mahmuda had used different lieutenants as interlocuters with local communities, hence the confusion.

Figure 3: August 2025 mugshot of Mahmuda (Source: Bayo Onanuga/X)

well-versed in the Qur'an.[33] Mahmuda's group never produced any formal propaganda, the closest thing to official statements being a series of audio messages from Mahmuda circulated on WhatsApp to communities surrounding his group's camps, in which he explains his group's religious mission and justifies his actions. In these audios, he typically refers to his group as "people of the forest" and his fighters as "students,"[34] although one individual who witnessed Mahmuda open a school in the forest in Kwara state said that he called it Darul Salam.[35]

Initially, Mahmuda's group focused on *dawa* (proselytization) by preaching to the communities within the Borgu emirate and was relatively non-confrontational. One vigilante member from Kwara state recalls:

> *When they captured two of my vigilantes, insisting they would take them if I didn't come, I decided to meet them. I was greeted by their members, who claimed they were not there to cause violence. They requested that we send our boys to teach them, assuring us that as long as we did not attack them, they would not attack us. After our meeting, they did not come into our villages or attack us, but they would stop people on the road to ask questions.*[36]

In keeping with the group's initial preference for *dawa* over violence, Mahmuda made overtures to the local salafi community (often referred to colloquially as Izala, after the name of the most prominent Nigerian salafi-adjacent organizations[v]) during his first months in Borgu. This was an unusual step for a Nigerian jihadi group: Ever since Mohammed Yusuf had fallen out with the salafi mainstream by the late-2000s, salafi clerics have consistently condemned the *takfiri* violence of Yusuf's successors.[37] Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, Mahmuda's approach was unsuccessful. As one respondent recalled: "Since Mahmuda's group operates in the forest, all the Izala people refused to work with them."[38]

Mahmuda had more luck with traditional rulers in the Borgu area. Jihadi commanders often seek arrangements with traditional rulers, who might be desperate for alternative sources of security provision.[w] But in Mahmuda's case, it seems that the traditional rulers were simply looking to collect the fees that such rulers often feel they are entitled to for conducting any meeting or business with outsiders. As one source in Kaiama explained, "[The traditional ruler] took money for sheltering them. They told him they came to preach and gave him ten million naira [approximately 6,800 USD] ... Traditional leaders generally like visitors because they pay them a sheltering levy; Fulani and migrants do it a lot."[39]

It would be a mistake to characterize Mahmuda's group as having ever been truly non-violent, however. *Dawa* was a way of recruiting people into a movement that was clearly preparing for a conflict of one sort or another, as one source recalled: "Wherever he went, he told people he wanted to teach them religious books. But after two weeks, he would persuade them to train with weapons and join his group."[40]

Moreover, his group combined efforts at outreach with violence against individuals or communities who refused to cooperate. Mahmuda seemed to employ abductions as a tool of coercion, with traditional rulers or vigilante members being targeted for "detention," as Mahmuda called it, until they would agree to work with the group, although the lines between coercive abduction and kidnapping-for-ransom were somewhat blurred in practice.[x]

Mahmuda employed a common jihadi strategy of attempting to

v Izala, formally Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'ah Wa Iqamatus Sunnah (JIBWIS), was founded in 1978 as an anti-Sufi movement and remains a prominent Islamic organization to this day. Many Nigerians refer to all salafi-leaning Muslims as Izala despite the fact that many clerics who could arguably be considered salafis are not formally part of Izala. Alexander Thurston indeed argues that Nigerian salafism emerged as a distinct ideological trend that began to split from Izala by the 1990s, although he acknowledges that "dividing lines between the two groups remain blurry." Alexander Thurston, *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 92. See also Alexander Thurston, "Muslim Politics and Shari'a in Kano State, Northern Nigeria," *African Affairs* 114:454 (2015): pp. 28-51.

w This was the case for the traditional ruler in Balle, Sokoto, who first invited Lakurawa to his community around 2018. See Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, "Importing Militant Jihadists: Analyzing the Response of Traditional Authorities to Muslim Youth Extremism in the Nigeria-Niger Border Areas of Sokoto State" in David Ehrhardt, David O. Alao, and M. Sani Umar eds., *Traditional Authority and Security in Contemporary Nigeria* (London: Routledge, 2024), pp. 151-168.

x Mahmuda forcefully collected "donations" from loggers and farmers. Several sources recounted how the Gbenya community of Kaiama initially refused this arrangement, and in response, Mahmuda's group kidnapped several surveyors sent by the federal government as part of a road-building project near Karonji, because Mahmuda claimed that the road was going to benefit the Gbenya community. However, Mahmuda's group eventually released the abducted surveyors for a ransom, rendering the claim that the abductions were purely a form of punishment rather than profit somewhat tenuous. Author's interview in Niger state #1, January 2025; author's interviews in Kwara #6 and #7, February 2025.

win popular support by defending communities against bandits. As detailed further in this study, such a strategy poses a complex balancing act for jihadis and contains many potential pitfalls. In addition to being highly mobile and operating across the border in Benin (see below), one cell of Mahmuda's group was reportedly rebuffed by vigilantes when it attempted to move southward into Kishi in the northern part of Oyo state in 2023 or 2024.[41] It is possible that members of the group hoped to establish a small presence in Old Oyo National Park (where bandits operate and illegal mining takes place[42][y]) as part of a broader effort to establish a corridor near the Benin border, or simply as a fallback area after operations in Kwara. It is unclear, however, if they ever managed to sustain a cell in the park.[z]

Mahmuda's audios and the authors' interviews indicate that Mahmuda was generally confident in his popular acceptance among communities in Borgu emirate until early 2025, when the Nigerian and Beninois began intensifying operations against his camps. These operations prompted Mahmuda to lash out against the communities he perceived as complicit.[43] In one of his last audios released in April 2025, Mahmuda spoke specifically to the communities around Baruten and Kaiama local government areas (LGAs)[aa] in Kwara, claiming that his group had sought good relations with the communities but that they had betrayed him by collaborating with the military.[44] Finally, following months of military operations against the group,[ab] Nigerian Department of State Services (DSS) agents captured Mahmuda in August 2025.[45] While the authorities have not released many details about Mahmuda since his arrest, it is possible that more will be learned about his group in the coming months. As of this writing, it remains an open question whether his group will fracture or if a new commander will assume control.

An Insurgency Cut Short, or JNIM's Newest Affiliate?

Given the confusion among analysts regarding Mahmuda's affiliation and mounting evidence of JNIM encroachment into Nigeria, the authors believe a brief discussion on Mahmuda's potential ties to JNIM is merited. However, the analysis here is somewhat more speculative than in other parts of this study given the difficulty in getting verified information regarding JNIM's presence in Nigeria.

Since early 2025, analysts have speculated about links between Mahmuda's group and JNIM given the proximity between the two groups on different sides of the Benin-Nigeria border.[46] There is indeed some evidence pointing to a relationship with JNIM. One security source noted that communications showed Mahmuda was in touch with a JNIM cell in Burkina Faso.[47] Furthermore, Mahmuda and his fighters frequently crossed into Benin, visiting various locations in the Borgou and Alibori departments such as Kandi, Kalalé, and Nikki.[ac] While Nikki is farther south than JNIM has historically operated in Benin, the group has had a strong presence around Kandi, the northernmost of the three towns. Furthermore, JNIM claimed its southernmost attack within Benin to date in Basso (near Kalalé) along the Nigerian border on June 12, 2025,[48] indicating that the group is gradually establishing freedom of movement within central Benin.[ad] (See Figure 4.)

Jihadi activity in Nigeria-Benin border, 2022-25

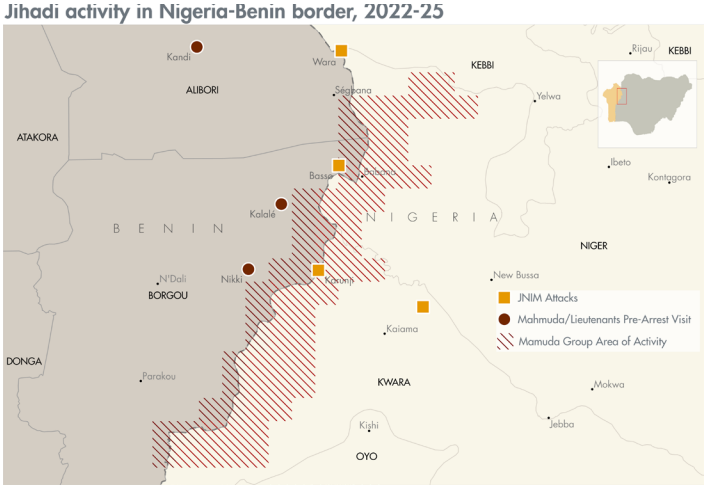

Figure 4: Areas in Benin where Mahmuda and/or his fighters were reported to have traveled prior to August 2025 as well as locations of JNIM's southernmost attacks in Benin and Nigeria as of November 30, 2025. Note: The JNIM attacks near Basso and Wara occurred on the Benin side of the border. (Source: original research).

As for JNIM, it is safe to say that the group is now operating on Nigerian territory, but it remains an open question how large and consistent a presence it maintains in the country. A video circulated on JNIM supporter channels in July 2025, shortly before Mahmuda's arrest, that showed a group of seven fighters, at least one of them non-Nigerian in appearance, who claimed to be a JNIM cell in Nigeria.[49] Then, on October 28, 2025, a video emerged that appeared to show JNIM fighters participating in their first attack in Nigeria, during which the fighters ambushed a small group of Nigerian soldiers in Kwara state. JNIM did not officially claim the attack through its formal media platform, but the video

y While respondents noted a growing presence of insecurity emanating from the park, they generally attributed this to Fulani bandits and illegal gold miners and said there were no instances of an "ideological" group operating in the state (i.e., one that would preach to communities in Mahmuda's manner).

z The authors would like to thank Janet Ogundairo for her extensive research support in Oyo state.

aa Referring to the administrative level in Nigeria below states and above districts or wards.

ab Notably, the Beninois military conducted operations against Mahmuda's fighters along their side of the border in the Borgou department. Two sources also mentioned that Beninois and Nigerian military forces conducted joint operations against the group on Nigerian soil. Author's interview in Niger state interview #2, January 2025; author's interview in Kwara interview #4, January 2025.

ac One source claimed that Mahmuda had recruited a number of *almajiri* students from one of these locations in Benin, including some Ghanaian migrants, and brought them back to Nigeria to study in his Islamiyah school in the bush, possibly indicating broader regional aspirations on Mahmuda's part. Author's interview in Kwara #4, January 2025; author's interview in Kwara #8, February 2025. Some of these movements are also referenced in relation to "Darul Salam" in Kars de Bruijne and Clara Gehrling, "Dangerous Liaisons: Exploring the risk of violent extremism along the border between Northern Benin and Nigeria," Clingendael, June 2024 and Kars de Bruijne, "Trouble at the border: a Nigerian extremist group has also entered Benin," Clingendael Institute, November 14, 2025.

ad Interestingly, the researcher Mathias Khalfaoui, who has extensive contacts in Benin, informed the authors that the attackers attacked Basso from Nigeria, pointing to at least a marginal JNIM staging area on the Nigerian side of the border. Authors' communication, Mathias Khalfaoui, June 2025.

circulated on JNIM-affiliated channels and featured fighters self-identifying as JNIM taking responsibility for the operation.[50] Less than a month later, on November 22, JNIM officially claimed (via its official al-Zallaqa media platform) an attack on a military position in Karonji, a community in Baruten LGA of Kwara along the Benin border.[51]

Given the limited number of fighters featured in the July 2025 video and the small scale of the October 2025 attack and later the November 2025 attack claimed by JNIM, it is not unreasonable to speculate that the group's presence in Nigeria might be relatively small at the moment. But the fact that the October and November attacks, as well as reports of suspected movements by JNIM fighters into Nigeria since as early as 2020,[52] coincide with the rough area of operations of Mahmuda's group also raises the possibility that the two groups are collaborating or at least tolerating each other's presence. Once again, the authors do not have hard evidence and can only speculate, but it is fair to presume that collaboration between the two groups would be one way for an otherwise small JNIM cell to operate in Nigeria—for example, Mahmuda's group providing a base and logistical support to JNIM. The arrest of Mahmuda creates yet another layer of uncertainty as the authors are not presently certain of the group's new leader, let alone their dispensation toward JNIM. These questions are quite significant given the implications of a larger JNIM presence in Nigeria amid all the other challenges the country faces. As such, this issue bears further research and monitoring.

Sadiku's Jihad: The JAS Experiment in Northwest Nigeria

A JAS commander known as "Sadiku" (a *nom de guerre*[ae]) has been one of the most successful Nigerian jihadi entrepreneurs outside the northeast, carving out a niche in the hills that bound Kaduna and Niger states since approximately 2020 and engaging in some of the most successful operations of any jihadi in the region. Sadiku's group serves as a fascinating case study of how jihadis navigate unfamiliar terrain in their efforts at expansion, and for this reason, his group is the subject of a separate, forthcoming study.[af] For the purposes of this study, it suffices to provide some brief background on Sadiku's group and assess his approach toward managing relations with bandits and the local population.

Sadiku has been a mysterious figure, and the first author has in fact mistakenly identified him as a native of the northwest in the past.[ag] However, it is now clear from speaking to six former associates of his that he is an ethnic Babur, a minority found in southern Borno, and an early member of *Yusufiyya*[ah] with a relatively advanced degree of Western and Islamic education by the standards of JAS commanders.[53] Around 2020, then JAS leader Abubakar Shekau designated Sadiku (or Sadiku and another commander, as some former associates recall[54]) as his envoy to the Darul Salam sect based in Nasarawa. While Sadiku seems to have worked closely with Darul Salam, helping their members learn bombmaking skills in an attempt to win their loyalty, he seems to have also been working to establish a JAS cell in Shiroro LGA of Niger state around this same period, with reports of jihadi-like attacks on villages beginning in early 2020 and escalating in 2021.[55]

When the military launched operations against Darul Salam's communes in Nasarawa in 2020, Sadiku's base of operations shifted to the hilly area straddling Shiroro LGA of Niger state and Chikun LGA of neighboring Kaduna state. At least a few Darul Salam members relocated with Sadiku to Kaduna/Niger and joined his JAS network,[ai] but others refused to join JAS while others still were detained in the military raids.[56]

It seems Sadiku took little time to broker two sets of agreements, broadly defined, in order to establish his group's new bases in Chikun and Shiroro LGAs. This area is principally inhabited by the Gwari, also known as Gbagyi, a minority community in central Nigeria who have largely been displaced from their homes since the 1990s when the government moved the federal capital to Abuja. These communities were suffering from bandit attacks when Sadiku stepped in, offering his group as a security provider to those communities in return for their cooperation and support.[57] That many of the Gwari are Christian mattered little to Sadiku who, in stark contrast to JAS' approach in the northeast, did not interfere with the Gwari villages around his bases in Chikun, allowing them to attend their churches and more or less go about their lives

ae His real name is either Adamu Yunusa, according to the United Nations, or Yunusa Kwaya, according to the Maiduguri-based journalist Ijasini Ijani. "Letter dated 6 February 2025 from the President of the Security Council acting in the absence of a Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council," United Nations Security Council, February 6, 2025, p. 8; authors' correspondence, Ijasini Ijani, August 2025.

af An article by James Barnett, Vincent Foucher, and Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i on Sadiku's group is forthcoming as of the time of this publication. The authors would like to thank Vincent Foucher for permitting them to use some of the data from his interviews for this present analysis of Sadiku's group.

ag Sadiku became so entrenched in the militant landscape of the northwest that many local figures who have interacted with his group, as well as some ex-JAS associates, believed him to be ethnically Fulani. The first author of this present study reported as much in previous studies based on what his sources were reporting at the time, although he is now confident that Sadiku in fact hails from the northeast. For previous reporting on Sadiku, see James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, "Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a 'Banditization' of Jihad?" *CTC Sentinel* 15:1 (2022) and James Barnett and Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, "A 'Sahelian' or a 'Littoral' Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria's Boko Haram Conflict," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 32 (2023): pp. 5-46.

ah The name that followers of Mohammed Yusuf's preferred to use before Yusuf's death in 2009 and the movement's rebranding as JAS under Abubakar Shekau.

ai Some sources insist that Sadiku had himself been a member of the original Darul Salam commune in Mokwa, as the first author previously reported, but this now seems unlikely in light of new information. Some individuals who joined Sadiku's group from Darul Salam may include Umar Taraba, an influential commander whom some ex-JAS sources described as having first met Sadiku while in the Nasarawa camps after making hijrah from Taraba state to an Islamic "community." Baba Adamu, another of Sadiku's senior lieutenants, had been an earlier member of JAS but also intimated to interlocuters during the Abuja-Kaduna train negotiations that he had been a member of Darul Salam at some point in his youth (despite being a Yobe indigene, he spent much of his youth in the northwest and north central). This will be discussed in the forthcoming study on Sadiku.

unimpeded.[58] [aj] In return, these villagers would help Sadiku's group gather supplies, transport fighters (and sometimes hostages) along rural roads, and provide intelligence of any security forces in the region.[59]

The second group that Sadiku needed to find an arrangement with were the local bandits. The region where his group operates is home to numerous gangs, including some that are linked to several of the biggest warlords in the northwest. Beneficial relations with these bandits could allow Sadiku to tap into the lucrative illicit economy of the region—dominated by cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, logging, and gold mining—while hostility toward the bandits could result in his still-small group being overrun in their new bases. Yet, embracing the bandits wholeheartedly would not only have undermined Sadiku's own credibility as a jihadi[60] but also harmed his effort to win the trust of the local Gwari communities.

Sadiku's approach to banditry was thus to employ both carrot and stick: Early in his foray into the region, he called a number of bandits who had been raiding Gwari villages in Chikun LGA and encouraged them to join his group to gain sophisticated weapons (e.g., IEDs) in return for reaching an arrangement with the local Gwari villages.[61] Some agreed, while those who refused became valid targets for Sadiku's group, who began attacking the bandits as a way of earning the support of the local Gwari (a similar tactic to what Ansaru was doing in another part of Kaduna around this time,[62] as well as Lakurawa in parts of Sokoto[63]). At the same time, Sadiku formed pragmatic alliances with some of the stronger bandit warlords in the northwest, such as Dogo Gide, the late Ali Kawaje, and Dankarami (aka Gwaska),[64] although his relationship with Dogo Gide deteriorated and resulted in conflict in early 2025, as detailed in a subsequent section.

Sadiku's group was responsible for an audacious March 2022 attack on the rail line that connects Abuja to Kaduna. With the support of some bandits,[65] [ak] his fighters used explosives to sabotage the rail track before taking dozens of passengers hostage.[66] After months of negotiations, his group secured hundreds of millions of Naira (tens of thousands of dollars) as ransom along with the release of several associates who had been in detention (including children of Sadiku and his associates who had been picked up by the military in Nasarawa in 2020 and subsequently housed in an orphanage).[67] The windfall from the train kidnapping helped Sadiku keep his commanders, bandit partners, and even members of the local Gwari community satisfied, although it also strained his relationship with the overall JAS leader in the northeast, Bakura, who expected that some of the proceeds would make their way to the northeast.[68] (The authors' understanding is that Sadiku remains loyal, as of this writing, to Bakura and at least nominally part of JAS, although he operates highly autonomously.)

Yet, despite its limited popular outreach, Sadiku remains a violent militant. His group appears to be more hostile to parts of the population in Shiroro in Niger state than in Kaduna, where his relationship with local communities seems strongest (see Figure 5 below for a comparison of recorded attacks, per ACLED).[al] One resident of a community in Shiroro described the group's relationship toward residents as one of "fraud" because the jihadis are often requisitioning goods from the communities without paying market price.[69]

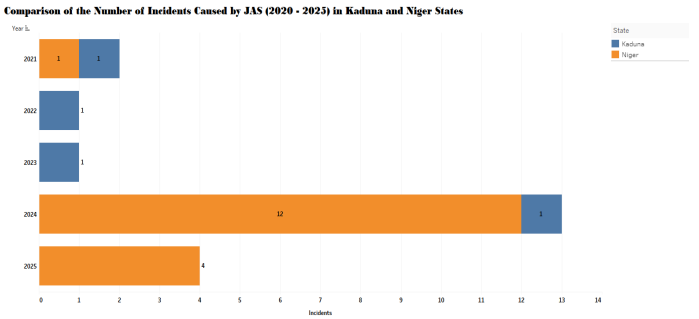

Figure 5: Conflict incidents related to JAS in Kaduna and Niger states, January 2020 to July 2025 (Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data)[am]

The reasons for this discrepancy are unclear, but one possibility is that his lieutenants in Shiroro are perhaps more aggressive than the lieutenants who oversaw the camps in Kaduna.[70] Moreover, some of the communities in Niger state where Sadiku's group operates fall under the influence of the bandit Dogo Gide,[71] with whom Sadiku has had an inconsistent relationship (detailed later in this article). It is possible that Sadiku's group has consequently viewed the communities in Niger with greater suspicion given their links to Gide. While Sadiku's fighters have been forced to relocate within and outside Niger state since early 2025 due to clashes with Dogo Gide's gang, his network has proven resilient in and will likely continue to operate in the northwest so long as it can find the right balance of influence with bandits and local populations.

ISWAP

No group has achieved more notoriety for its operations outside northeastern Nigeria than ISWAP. While always principally focusing its efforts on the insurgency against the Nigerian military

aj Sadiku's relative tolerance of the Christian Gwari is notable given the ultra-violent approach the JAS has taken toward Christians (and indeed most Muslims) in the northeast. Sadiku's attitude of relevant tolerance seems to be rooted in pragmatic calculations and a sense that Shekau's hardline attitude led to excesses that backfired for JAS. These dynamics are detailed further in the forthcoming study on Sadiku.

ak Former hostages from the kidnapping described how the assault teams themselves were clearly divided into two: one comprised of local bandits and one led by Sadiku's group. For example, some hostages recalled that one group of fighters were dressed in turbans and had their faces covered (typical of jihadis) while the other group were dressed more casually and did not cover their faces (typically of many bandits), while other sources described that, based on their facial markings, some of the abductors could be easily identified as Fulani (and thus more likely to be bandits from the northwest). This is drawn from the authors' interviews and interactions with the former train hostages between 2022 and 2025.

al ACLED does not record a number of attacks in this time frame that the authors have knowledge of and have high confidence can be attributed to Sadiku's group. Because ACLED relies on local media reporting, a number of attacks conducted by Sadiku's group are coded as being the work of ISWAP or bandits in the ACLED dataset based on Nigerian media reports. For the purposes of this graph, the authors included some incidents in Niger and Kaduna states that were coded as such (e.g., ISWAP or bandits) if the authors had high confidence that the attacks in question had actually been the work of the Sadiku faction based either on their location or the reporting of other sources.

am The authors would like to thank Eugenia Igwe for her help analyzing and visualizing ACLED's data.

in the northeast,[72] in 2022, the group began claiming attacks in central and even southern Nigeria. The group claimed attacks in nine states outside of the northeast as well as in the Federal Capital Territory in 2022 and early 2023. (See Figure 6.) The most spectacular of these, a July 2022 attack (conducted with support from other jihadi groups) on Kuje prison in a suburb of Abuja that freed over 60 high-profile Boko Haram detainees,[73] briefly led to a panic in the nation's capital and was followed a few months later by another (thwarted) attempt in Abuja, this time to attack the country's Defence Headquarters with a suicide vehicle-borne IED (SVBIED).[74] [an]

Understanding how and why ISWAP undertook this campaign in 2022-2023 provides necessary context to one of the key findings of this study, which is that jihadis seek where possible to coopt existing social and religious networks in their efforts at expansion. According to defectors, ISWAP's senior leadership had long debated whether to undertake the risk of a terrorist campaign targeting urban centers across northern Nigeria or whether to focus resources and energy in the northeast, where they felt they were gradually gaining ground.[75] ISWAP experienced a power struggle around 2021 in which Habib Yusuf (aka Abu Musab al-Barnawi, son of the late Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf) succeeded in purging an internal rival, Mustapha Kirmima, and reasserted himself as overall leader of the group.[76] [ao]

Habib reportedly felt ISWAP should undertake a campaign in "Nigeria" (what ISWAP fighters call the rest of the country, as opposed to the northeast—i.e., part of the broader Islamic State "caliphate"[77]) and had a relationship with a two key commanders, Abu Qatada and Abu Ikrima, whom he felt could oversee the campaign.[78] As Habib saw it, the benefits of a campaign outside the northeast could be manyfold—including gaining additional revenue from kidnapping and money laundering, winning new recruits (including by freeing veteran jihadis from prisons),[ap] tying down military forces far from ISWAP's base of operations, and simply exacting revenge against the Nigerian state.[aq] After ISWAP killed Shekau in May 2021, Habib likely also felt that a campaign in western Nigeria could rally the remaining Nigerian jihadis outside his fold, namely the Ansaru faction that was reasserting itself in Kaduna at the time (see subsequent section), thereby reunifying the Nigerian jihad under one banner as it had (briefly) been under his father.[ar]

Abu Qatada and Abu Ikrima were both ethnic Ebiras from Kogi state.[79] Kogi was an ideal hinge-point for ISWAP's expansion both because of its geography—situated beneath Abuja and on the edges of the southwest—and because of its small but important jihadi scene within the Ebira community that could potentially be rallied for ISWAP's campaign. The authors' sources offer somewhat conflicting reports as to whether Habib chose Abu Qatada to oversee operations, with Abu Qatada then deputizing Abu Ikrima to relocate to the north central region for day-to-day management of the campaign, or if Abu Ikrima took the initiative to propose a campaign based in Kogi to Habib, with Habib urging both Abu Qatada and Abu Ikrima permission to collaborate. In either case, according to one defector, Abu Qatada was nominally Ikrima's superior, while Abu Ikrima spent much of 2022 and 2023 on the move across Nigeria while overseeing a network of fighters based in Kogi.[80]

Ikrima's network was highly active in the second and third quarters of 2022, conducting a string of ISWAP-claimed shootings and bombings in Kogi and parts of neighboring Ondo and Edo states as well as participating in the Kuje prison break.[81] Ikrima's network helped plan the latter, representing the highwater mark of ISWAP's Kogi-based campaign (although some reports suggest many of the attackers were ISWAP fighters dispatched from Lake Chad for the operation,[82] while members of other jihadi groups also likely took part[83]).

Following the success of the Kuje assault, Ikrima promised Habib that his network could strike a series of more ambitious targets, including targets in Abuja and other detention facilities across northern Nigeria.[84] According to defectors, Habib agreed

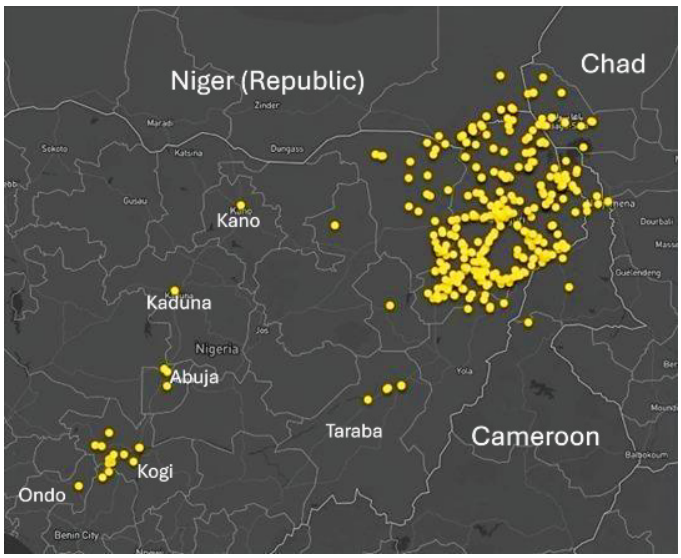

Figure 6: Map of attacks claimed by ISWAP between January 2019 and April 2023 (Source: ExTrac, additional geographic labels added by the authors). Note the long distance between the attacks in Abuja and Kogi and the main locus of activity in the northeast.

an The actual intended ISWAP target in Abuja at this time was the Defence Headquarters, located close to the U.S. embassy, according to several diplomats and security sources in the capital.

ao In a 2023 study, the first author also hypothesized that the campaign at expansion was driven by disagreements within ISWAP over whether to sustain a Borno-focused status quo or adopt a more aggressive strategic expansion, with the latter camp winning out. See Barnett and Rufa'i, "A 'Sahelian' or a 'Littoral' Crisis?"

ap A number of senior jihadi commanders from earlier years of the Boko Haram conflict were housed in different facilities across Nigeria as a safeguard against potential prisonbreaks. Members of Ansaru and Abu Ikrima's network reportedly provided intelligence for the Kuje prison break in part because one of their old associates from Kogi, Idris Ojo, was in the prison. Author's interview, ex-ISWAP fighter #2, January 2025. See also Barnett and Rufa'i, "A 'Sahelian' or a 'Littoral' Crisis?" and Taiwo Hassan Adebayo, "Addressing the Threats of Expanding Boko Haram Groups," Centre for Journalism Innovation & Development, August 2024.

aq Some of the first targets ISWAP bombed in "western Nigeria" in 2022 – a church, bars, a military barracks – point to these various motivations for the campaign. Barnett and Rufa'i, "A 'Sahelian' or a 'Littoral' Crisis?"

ar Indeed, of the 64 terror suspects, mostly former JAS and Ansaru members, who escaped during ISWAP's Kuje prison attack, several reportedly joined ISWAP, partially vindicating Habib's belief that a campaign outside the northeast could help rally different figures to ISWAP. See "JAS vs. ISWAP: The War of the Boko Haram Splinters," Africa Briefing no. 196 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2024).

to lend Ikrima dozens of AK-47 rifles and provided funds for the operations.[85]

However, Nigerian intelligence agencies were on alert after the Kuje attack and learned of the impending operations.[86] Additionally, one source claims that Ikrima's network had to recruit new fighters from Kogi and neighboring states in order to have sufficient manpower to conduct the operations, leaving these fighters with little time to train or even learn the true nature of their operations until the last minute, which resulted in the fighters making a string of tactical and operational security mistakes.[87] In late October 2022, Nigerian authorities thwarted several simultaneous plots by Ikrima's network, killing or capturing several dozen of the fighters in his network.[88] Ikrima's star within ISWAP tanked after the failure of this second round of attacks.[89] Unable to return the rifles ISWAP had lent him, Ikrima reportedly avoided returning to the northeast for fear of being branded a traitor and instead moved around different parts of north central Nigeria where he had contacts among fellow Kogi jihadis, including members of Ansaru.[90]

ISWAP's expansion into central Nigeria lost momentum by 2023: While Abu Qatada and another ISWAP commander from Kogi[as] reportedly continued the effort after Ikrima's falling out, Nigerian security agencies managed to arrest and neutralize various members of their networks.[91] Additionally, growing conflict between ISWAP and the Bakura-led JAS faction around Lake Chad in late 2022 forced ISWAP to divert energy and resources away from expansion toward the factional conflict closer to home.[92] ISWAP ceased claiming attacks outside the northeast in early 2023, with the exception of a shooting at a supermarket in an Abuja suburb in January 2024.[at]

However, since mid-2023, Nigerian intelligence agencies have arrested apparent ISWAP cells in various locations across central and even southwestern Nigeria,[93] indicating that the group has continued trying to build a network of urban cells to leverage for future campaigns outside the northeast.[au] These cells, dispersed as they are across the country, may be intended to offset the risks that came with relying on a network based principally in one state, Kogi, that had a history of operating autonomously and fragmenting, as detailed further in this study.

Two Ansarus? Kaduna and Kogi

Ansaru was one of the first groups to splinter from Boko Haram, forming around 2011-2012, and it has long been a subject of debate and speculation among analysts given its more secretive nature and apparent ties to al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).[94] The early group conducted several attacks across Nigeria's northwestern and north-central states between 2012 and 2013, including multiple kidnappings of Western nationals, before Nigerian security forces began dismantling the group's cells in 2014, culminating in the arrest of founding member Khalid al-Barnawi in the Kogi state capital in 2016.[95]

This section briefly analyzes two distinct and contrasting campaigns that have each been attributed by analysts and Nigerian officials to Ansaru, one being an overt insurgency seemingly inspired by JNIM that took over a small patch of Kaduna state between 2020 and 2022 and seemingly signaled Ansaru's reemergence as a regional jihadi actor; and the other being a clandestine and unclaimed campaign of terrorist attacks, kidnappings, and bank robberies that has occurred across Kogi state and parts of southwestern Nigeria over the past decade. The *modus operandi* of these two apparent networks—the one in Kaduna, reportedly led by one Mala Abba, and the one in Kogi, reportedly led by one Abu Baraa—were so different that the authors assess that the two groups actually split from each other for a time, a rift that is further attested to by one public communication released by the Kaduna-based group (see below).

Ansaru's insurgency in Kaduna was detailed in two previous studies by the first author. The group adopted a 'hearts and minds' approach to communities in the Birnin Gwari LGA of the state that had long been suffering from banditry. Aligning itself with the Hausa communities in those villages, Ansaru began fighting the surrounding smaller gangs, all while boasting of its exploits on al-Qa`ida-linked Telegram channels and preaching to communities about the necessity of jihad and the failures of democracy and the Nigerian government.[96] The group was successful for a time, earning some genuine popular support from otherwise desperate villagers, and members of the group began intermarrying with local communities as part of a broader effort at integration.[97] However, this overt insurgency was abruptly cut short in the summer of 2022 when the bandits that Ansaru had been antagonizing teamed up and drove the jihadis out of their enclaves in Birnin Gwari.[98] The group has since gone quiet,[99] making no public statements since that time. The authors have received sporadic reports since 2022 that suspected Ansaru members are still active around the northwest, including in neighboring Shiroro LGA of Niger state as well as parts of Zamfara, but their presence seems to be diminished, and it is difficult to determine if they are even operating as discrete cells or if the fighters have instead joined other jihadi outfits or even bandit gangs.

The authors have limited insight into the membership of the Kaduna-based Ansaru, except that locals who interacted with the group report that the fighters seem to have come from the northeast, which leads the authors to believe they were likely fighters in Shekau's JAS who defected to form this new group in the late 2010s/early 2020s rather than members of the original Ansaru.[av]

as The authors were informed that the commander's name is Ohida. He was publicly designated in 2024 by the Nigerian government as a terrorist financer, though the profile contained in the sanctions document is sparse: Apart from his full name (Abdulsamat Abdulkareem Ohida) and rank (a qaid in Okene for ISWAP), the authors of the document do not appear to know any other personal details about him, though they allege that he took part in the Kuje prison attack and the June 2022 attack on a church in Ondo. A copy of the sanctions document can be found online on the Nigeria Sanctions Committee's website.

at According to sources the authors spoke to, members of the Kogi network reportedly committed the attack in revenge for the arrest of one of their commanders.

au In one case in May 2023, a flat in Keffi in Nasarawa state was being used to assemble explosive devices, indicating an impending attack. Amos Tauna, "Two die of bomb explosion in Nasarawa," Daily Post, May 29, 2023.

av The original Ansaru was reportedly formed by members of the *Yusufiyya* movement and early JAS who hailed from the northwestern and north-central regions. Their defection from JAS in 2011-2012 was reportedly motivated in part by concerns that Shekau was sidelining non-Kanuri commanders. See Jacob Zenn and Caleb Weiss, "Ansaru Resurgent: The Rebirth of Al-Qaeda's Nigerian Franchise," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15:5 (2021): pp. 187-199. For more on "Ansaru 2.0" in Kaduna and its differences from the original Ansaru, see Barnett, Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz, "Jihadization of Banditry;" and Barnett and Rufa'i, "A 'Sahelian' or a 'Littoral' Crisis?"

Details about the leader of this network, known as Mala Abba,[100] are scant. Among bandits and jihadi defectors, he is rumored to have been captured and/or extrajudicially killed by security forces, though they provide differing dates between 2021 and 2024.[101] It is possible that security forces have captured the wrong individual on multiple occasions, and it is likewise possible that Mala Abba is a *nom de guerre* used by whoever leads the network at a given time, in which case the network may have already seen multiple leaders come and go. Despite operating in relatively close proximity to Sadiku's cell in Kaduna, a former member of that group recounted fighting Ansaru on several occasions and otherwise keeping their distance from them, underscoring the degree to which some of the factionalism of the early Boko Haram conflict (Ansaru having split from JAS as early as 2011) persists years later even in relatively "new" theaters of the jihad.[102]

Abu Baraa and Ansaru in Kogi

When Nigerian authorities announced the arrest of Abu Baraa in August 2025 alongside that of Mahmuda (although the two had been arrested in different locations at different times), they hailed it as the dismantling of the long-running Ansaru network in the country. The authors assess that Abu Baraa's network had in fact operated separately from the rest of Ansaru in Kaduna for at least several years, although he may have been in the process of reconciling with the Mala Abba faction (or what remained of it) at the time of his arrest. This assessment is based on what the authors have learned about the highly autonomous nature of his associates in the period around 2020-2023. Moreover, Mala Abba's network released an audio in 2022 in which they refuted claims, reportedly circulating in jihadi circles after the Abuja-Kaduna train attack, that Abu Baraa was their leader.[103] Researcher Malik Samuel also noted reports of a rift between Abu Baraa and the rest of Ansaru.[104]

The arrest of Abu Baraa was nevertheless significant as he was a veteran jihadi commander. Daniel Prado Simón and Vincent Foucher provide a useful biography of Abu Baraa that largely corroborates what the authors learned about him from their sources.[105] To briefly summarize, Abu Baraa (real name Mahmud Muhammad Usman) was born to an ethnic Ebira Islamic scholar from Kogi state (the present authors' sources add that his mother is Fulani[106]), though he grew up in Maiduguri.[107] He received secondary education and attempted to join the National Defence Academy but was rejected, to his frustration.[108] He was soon drawn to Mohammed Yusuf and became a member of the *amniyat* or internal security forces of Yusuf's movement.[109] When Ansaru split over disagreements with Yusuf's successor, Abubakar Shekau, in 2011-2012, Abu Baraa reportedly joined the network.[110] He received training from AQIM in Libya in the 2010s alongside other Ansaru associates[111] and would eventually become its emir after Khalid al-Barnawi, an early AQIM-linked jihadi and one of the faction's founding members, was arrested in 2016 in Kogi.[112]

Baraa was highly mobile within Nigeria, narrowly avoiding escape on at least one occasion.[113] By 2022, if not earlier, he had apparently fallen out with Mala Abba and the Ansaru group in Birnin Gwari, as previously noted. Despite this rift, he apparently continued to hold sway over a faction of the jihadi community in Ebiraland in Kogi (detailed later in this study) and networks in southwestern Nigeria, with cells in locations such as Shaki in northern Oyo, Owo in northern Ondo, and various parts of Kogi state alongside major northern cities such as Kaduna, Zaria, and Kano.[114] The network was involved in criminal activities such as bank robberies, kidnapping for ransom of both Nigerians and expatriates (including attacks on highways in the southwest),[115] and may have been responsible for a gruesome massacre at a Catholic church in Owo in 2022 that was widely attributed to ISWAP but never claimed.[116] [aw]

Figure 7: August 2025 mugshot of Abu Baraa (Source: Bayo Onanuga/X)

Indeed, in notable contrast to ISWAP and the Ansaru network operating in Birnin Gwari, Abu Baraa's network never claimed any attack. Per one security source, he "eschew[ed] publicity," preferring instead to raise funds for future operations through criminal activity and radicalizing new recruits into his cause.[117] His network was technologically savvy and better educated than the rank-and-file of other Nigerian jihadi groups. He and his associates were early users of Telegram in Nigeria to conduct outreach and radicalization aimed primarily at university students.[118] Despite principally comprising ethnic Ebira and Yorùbá,[ax] his network may have conducted outreach to some Fulani communities in the southwest that felt aggrieved by growing anti-pastoralist sentiment and harassment from Amotekun, a vigilante group created by southwestern governors in 2020 amid growing farmer-herder

aw The Nigerian authorities have begun a trial of five suspects arrested in connection with the Owo church attack, whom the DSS accuses of being members of the Somalia-based "al-Shabaab" group, although the DSS also noted that the five suspects operated from a cell in Kogi state (and all five suspects appear to be Kogi locals). It is possible that the apparent al-Shabaab connection is due to their having reportedly received training in Somalia through Abu Baraa's international connections, or it may be the case that the "al-Shabaab" label is an informal one that the cell used to refer to itself (similar to how the Islamic State-linked insurgency in Mozambique was originally known by locals as "al-Shabaab," literally "the youth" in Arabic). One can hope that the trials underway of both the five suspects as well as Abu Baraa will shed more light on the matter. See Ignatius Igwe, "DSS Confirms Prosecution of Owo Church Attack Suspects, Others," Channels TV, November 4, 2025.

ax The latter is one of Nigeria's most populous ethnic groups and the majority in the southwest.

conflict.[ay] This is in notable contrast to the Ansaru of Mala Abba, which effectively aligned with Hausa communities against Fulani in the course of its intervention in the banditry crisis in Birnin Gwari.[119]

It is unclear how much direct oversight Abu Baraa exercised over his network, as he was reportedly not based in Kogi in recent years.[120] As noted previously, the exact relationship between Mahmuda and Abu Baraa remains somewhat unclear to the authors, although they clearly knew each other and had been in contact before their arrests.[121] Interestingly, despite being in Ansaru, Abu Baraa may have also played an indirect role in the growth of Sadiku's JAS network in Kaduna, as several of Sadiku's future lieutenants undertook Islamic studies at one point or another in the Kinkinau neighborhood of Kaduna state where Abu Baraa was based for a time and expressed familiarity with him, indicating that he may have helped play a role in radicalizing them.[az]

The authors' interviews in the first half of 2025, shortly before his arrest, indicated that Abu Baraa was likely in the process of attempting to reconcile the different factions of Ansaru that had previously split and possibly conducting outreach to other jihadi cells in north central Nigeria.[122] In this sense, the authors may concur at least in part with Simón and Foucher's assessment that at the time of his arrest, Abu Baraa was "attempting to coordinate among Nigeria's many jihadi factions and their Sahelian counterparts … among whom he enjoyed considerable respect."[123] Indeed, it may have been because Abu Baraa was consistently relocating to mediate between factions that he proved vulnerable to arrest.[124]

Lakurawa

"Lakurawa" is the colloquial term used by Nigerians to describe Sahelian militants who first appeared in the borderlands of northwest Nigeria in 2017-2018 (although the militants were earlier known as *Lakuruje*).[ba] Notably, it was traditional authorities in Sokoto state who first invited Lakurawa to provide protection to their communities from Zamfara-based bandits.[125] The militants soon overstayed their welcome, however, clashing with some of the community leaders who first welcomed them and enforcing a harsh interpretation of sharia law that alienated much of the rural population.[126] These militants have been highly active once again in the northwest since late 2024, generating significant media attention within Nigeria and internationally[127] and prompting the Nigerian military to reframe its operations in the northwest, at least partially, as an offensive against the group.[128]

The identity and affiliation of Lakurawa have been much debated among analysts. As described in a separate article by the first author, some of the confusion stems from the fact that the original Lakurawa group seems to have been quite heterogenous, comprising both Malian and Nigerien militants who came from different Fulani clans and had differing *modus operandi*.[129] Furthermore, given the fluidity of jihadi alliances and fracturing in the Sahel, some of the original members of Lakurawa may have been affiliated with JNIM in 2017-2018 but are now affiliated with ISSP.[130] Nonetheless, the present evidence points to the majority of so-called Lakurawa activity, particularly in Sokoto and northern Kebbi states, as being the work of ISSP militants. Among other evidence, United Nations experts have identified ISSP activity in these states as well as an ISWAP logistics hub in Sokoto reportedly used to facilitate coordination between the two Islamic State affiliates.[131] As Héni Nsaibia demonstrates in a recent ACLED report on the southward expansion of Sahelian jihadis, ISSP has been pushing steadily from southern Niger into northwestern Nigeria in 2024-2025, and the ingress points of Lakurawa into Nigeria (e.g., Tangaza and Gudu LGAs of Sokoto) correspond with known ISSP bases on the Nigerien side of the border.[132] (See Figure 8 below from the ACLED report.) At the same time, some evidence suggests that JNIM may also be intermittently operating in parts of Kebbi and Niger states (see the previous section on Mahmuda's group for more) under the guise of "Lakurawa," as at least one former Nigerian jihadi has been approached for collaboration by self-described al-Qa`ida-affiliated Lakurawa members.[133] Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, most of the authors' analysis focuses on the activity of Lakurawa in Sokoto and parts of Kebbi state where, the authors can reasonably assume, so-called Lakurawa activity is the work of ISSP.

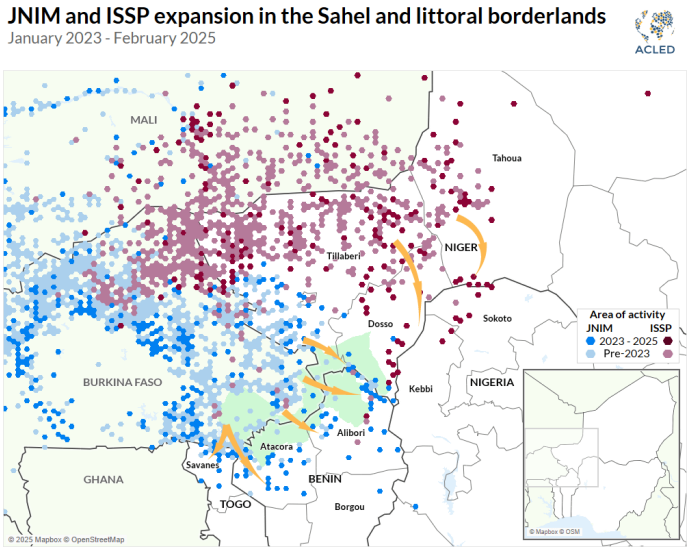

Figure 8: Lakurawa (ISSP) activity in northwestern Nigeria and neighboring countries. (Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), Héni Nsaibia, and Christian Jaffe. For the full report from March 2025 by Héni Nsaibia, see citation.[134])

Despite their growing notoriety within Nigeria, the militants work hard to maintain operational security, never telling communities whether they belong to ISSP, JNIM, or any other

ay According to the authors' research, the attack on the Catholic church in Owo in June 2022 was conducted by Kogi jihadis in Abu Bara's network who had come to know several Fulani pastoralists who had been evicted from Owo by the community amid deteriorating farmer-herder relations in the region. In this telling, the attack on Owo was conducted by Ansaru members (not the herders) who, being familiar with local pastoralist grievances, hoped to further accelerate farmer-herder conflict in the region and thereby push more Fulani to join the jihad. Author's interview, security official #4, March 2025; author's interview, Ondo-based source #1, April 2025.

az Three of Sadiku's lieutenants, Baba Adamu, Mohammed Kabir, and Mohammed Mohammed, either claimed or implied during the course of negotiations over the Abuja-Kaduna train kidnapping to have once been students of Ahmad Adam al-Garkawi, a salafi cleric in Kinkinau. It is possible that Abu Baraa even recruited some of these future commanders of Sadiku's into the jihadi orbit from al-Garkawi's Islamic schools. Author's interviews, intermediaries #2 and #3, February 2025; author's interview, Abu Baraa former associate, June 2025.

ba Some Nigerian sources place the militia's emergence as early as the 1990s, though it is likely that any continuity between herders' militias in the Sahel then and the present Lakurawa is minimal. See Zagazola, "Origins of the Lakurawa," Zagazola, March 13, 2025.

faction, likely because the confusion surrounding their identity benefits them.[135] The composition of Lakurawa therefore remains rather unclear, and analysts and journalists have floated several names of potential leaders since late 2024.[136] A July 2025 article by *Mondafrique*, citing unnamed sources, said that one Namata Korsinga, a Nigerien Fulani from the commune of Abala Filingue in Tillaberi, is the leader of the Lakurawa subgroup while his younger brother, Saadu Korsinga, is the leader of the ISSP *Katiba* that has been active in western Niger in recent months.[137] A colleague the authors consulted had also heard reports of one Kousanga (likely an alternative spelling of Korsinga) in Lakurawa, but as a deputy of the group beneath a more senior ISSP commander, and noted that sources gave conflicting names of the overall Lakurawa leader.[138] The authors had heard from their contacts in Sokoto earlier in 2025 that leaders of Lakurawa included one Namata—lending weight to *Mondafrique*'s reporting—as well as Abu Muslim, Abu Anas, Manu (possibly a former ISWAP associate, according to some of the authors' sources), and Abdulkarim.[139] A very rough picture of the group's leadership thus may be starting to emerge, but much work remains to be done to clarify the leadership as well as overall size and composition of the group.

2024-2025: A New Modus Operandi?

While Lakurawa is not a new group, its operations since late 2024 have differed from its initial incursions in notable ways that point to a more aggressive campaign of expansion. This could be explained by several factors, including ISSP's desire to break out of the Liptako-Gourma tri-border region of the Sahel (where it has long been contained) and establish a corridor to Benin via northwestern Nigeria as part of its competition with its JNIM rivals.[140] [bb] The militants may also be taking advantage of the breakdown in relations between Nigeria and Niger following the July 2023 coup in Niamey that has hindered cross-border cooperation.[141] In these efforts, the group's approach to local Nigerian communities varies from protection to hostility.

Lakurawa is currently operating across a much wider swath of northwestern Nigeria than it did previously. Whereas the group previously operated almost exclusively in Tangaza and Gudu LGAs in Sokoto state along the border with Niger, in late 2024, it began operating farther within the interior of Sokoto, particularly in a stretch of sparse forest across Binji and Silame LGAs that extends to within 20 miles of the Sokoto state capital.[142] More worrying still, the group has been active in neighboring Kebbi state, particularly in Augi, Arewa Dandi, and Argungu LGAs down to Bunza, Dandi (Kamba), and Bagudo LGAs (which share a border with Benin).[143] Wherever they operate, according to locals, "they tend to move through various villages during the day without much interaction … They do not ask for directions, suggesting they might already know the area."[144]

The group appears to have consolidated influence in the border regions of Sokoto where it first appeared in the late 2010s: In Gudu LGA and Tangaza LGA, respondents said the group has closed down public schools[145] and replaced existing imams by appointing their own their own (either from the community, or by appointing members of the group to preach themselves).[146] [bc] The group prevents civil servants and security personnel from entering the area[147] (with an exception for health professionals, at least in the case of Balle in Gudu LGA[148]). As one source in Tangaza explained, "In so far as you have anything that identifies your relations with the government like ID cards, [a certain] vehicle plate number, they will seize it and even threaten to kill you."[149] Lakurawa is also still, as it was in 2018, fighting bandits selectively in a manner that allows it to present itself as a defender of vulnerable Muslim communities. The group is also adjudicating land disputes and conflicts between farmers and herders, supplanting the role of traditional authorities.[150]

Unfortunately, this approach seems effective to some extent. Various respondents spoke more favorably of Lakurawa than bandits, particularly in the northernmost parts of Sokoto state. One resident in Tangaza recounted how his friend had been kidnapped by bandits and freed by Lakurawa in October 2024 when the latter attacked a bandits' camp. As he recalled: "They asked him for the contact of his people, and they called us to inform that the man is in safe hands. The following day, they arranged for his returning back home … and he was dropped off."[151] These sorts of experiences can cumulatively contribute to building a degree of popular support. As a community leader Tangaza LGA frankly remarked, "The reality is whoever saved you from kidnappers, you will never forget him. This is the true picture of what transpired: the Lakurawa saved us from the bandits when the government could not do anything."[152]

But at the same time, the group is once again attempting to impose its extreme interpretations of the sharia that many residents find excessive and harsh. In rural parts of Augi LGA of Kebbi state, many shops have ceased selling cigarettes (which are often but not exclusively consumed by bandits, providing some income to local vendors) out of fear of incurring Lakurawa's wrath,[153] while elsewhere in the northwest, Lakurawa has flogged residents for having haircuts deemed "un-Islamic."[154] Even the foreignness of the militants poses some basic stumbling blocks to their expansion, at least in certain communities in the region, as one of the authors' interviewees in Sokoto bluntly observed:[155]

Q: Have you ever listened to them preach?
A: Yes, they preach in French, Fulfulde, Zabarmanci, and Buzanci, but not in Hausa. Those are their native languages.
Q: Do people here understand those languages?
A: No. They just form a circle and listen without truly understanding.

The group has also shown less compunction about attacking and stealing from civilians whom it deems to have disobeyed its injunctions. The authors' interviews[bd] suggest a geographic correlation to Lakurawa's relative hostility toward local communities, with respondents in Kebbi state and the interior of

bb A January 2025 attack on a customs and immigration checkpoint in Arewa Dandi LGA of Kebbi was likely conducted by ISSP/Lakurawa fighters and would point to the group's interest in establishing a corridor to Benin. Nafisat Abdulrahman, "Lakurawa Kills 2 Immigration Officers, 1 Civilian in Kebbi Border Attack," Leadership, January 12, 2025.

bc As one member of a focus group discussion from Tangaza narrated: "They usually move into the village and gather people to tell them [Lakurawa] are better than the governments or the religious clerics there. They can meet people during prayer and change the imam claiming he cannot lead or teach, and they replace him with someone among them to lead and teach."

bd This is based on a sample size of more than 50 respondents interviewed (individually or in focus group discussions) across six LGAs in Sokoto state and seven LGAs in Kebbi state between January and February 2025, as well as several additional interviews conducted in the two states in May 2025.

Sokoto state recounting more abuse at the hands of the group than those in northern Sokoto (e.g., Tangaza and Gudu LGAs) during fieldwork in early 2025.[be] This could be a function of different commanders within the group adopting different strategies in their respective areas, but it is also likely rooted in the fact that the group has longer-standing ties with communities in northern Sokoto and thus less need to enforce compliance violently. In Kebbi and central Sokoto, by contrast, Lakurawa has stolen cattle from communities under the auspices of *zakat* collection[156] and attacked villages that raise vigilante groups,[157] indicating that its violence is largely aimed at asserting dominance over populations in the frontiers of its new expansion.

As a result of these more recent and aggressive tactics, many respondents in Kebbi and Sokoto distinguished between the "original" Lakurawa and what they perceive as a different, current manifestation of the group. As one source in Kebbi claimed, "the first set claimed to be preaching Islam, while the second set engages in violent attacks on people's lives and livestock."[158] Yet other respondents went further and speculated that Lakurawa are in fact bandits using the jihadi label as a guise for their operations. One claimed: "These recent people I believe are a distortion of the Lakurawa we know. We believe [they are] the bandits that were raided by security forces that changed to become the new Lakurawa, since the main Lakurawa have forced them out of kidnapping and cattle rustling."[159] Another source noted differences in the appearance and ethnicity of the present Lakurawa and those of the first militants who emerged in 2018:

> *The Lakurawa we knew wore turbans. This new group also wears turbans but has facial markings, and the turbanning is very different. They appeared to be a mix of Fulani and Tuaregs before, but now even Hausa and Zabarma are among them. The old Lakurawa used to pay for what they took from shops. If their cattle destroyed your crops, they would come, assess the damage, and pay you. This new group does not pay; they simply seize everything.*[160]

The authors do not agree with the assessment that Lakurawa are merely bandits by another name, nor is there strong evidence to suggest that the current Lakurawa are a fundamentally different set of militants than the first group (although the heterogeneity of the militants circa 2017-2018 and limited insight into the group's current membership make it difficult to assess with any confidence). Nonetheless, the aforementioned quotes underscore the challenges that Lakurawa faces in upholding the reputation for defending communities from banditry that it has tried to cultivate in the northwest, as discussed in the following section.[bf]

Facilitators or Impediments to Expansion? The Interplay between Bandits and Jihadis

The preceding sections have provided brief overviews of the key jihadi groups that are operating in western Nigeria at present. In this section, the authors elaborate on the first of two factors that they identify as being critical to facilitating jihadi operations in western Nigeria, which they dub the banditry "Goldilocks effect."

Understanding Bandits, Jihadis, and their Interplay

The ongoing banditry crisis in northern Nigeria constitutes an immensely fragmented and complex conflict that has not received as much analytical or scholarly attention as the Boko Haram conflict in the northeast. For the purposes of this study, it suffices to emphasize two key characteristics of contemporary banditry in northern Nigeria.

First, bandit leadership and hierarchies are decentralized and fluid—but banditry is hardly egalitarian, and not all bandits are equal in their power or influence. There is no precise or reliable estimate of the total number of bandits operating in northwestern Nigeria—which could be complicated by the fact that some fighters are "part-time" bandits[161]—although officials have often given a (likely excessive) estimate of up to 30,000 armed bandits.[162] The number of gangs is similarly difficult to gauge, although there are undoubtedly dozens and possibly several hundred,[163] depending on how one distinguishes one gang from another. This is difficult, as underscored by a recent study co-authored by one of the present authors that argues:

> *Unlike armies or insurgencies with formalised chains of command, banditry operates through a delicate interplay of autonomy and allegiance, resulting in a centrifugal dynamic of radical fragmentation and a centripetal logic based on specific forms of 'capital' that hold currency in bandit society… A major bandit leader may occupy a camp with a group of loyal bandits no bigger than 50. But spread in his area of influence are minor kachallas [commanders] with their own groups, who are independent in their actions but nonetheless pledge allegiance to the oga [top bandit].*[164]

For example, that study shows that in one LGA alone in eastern Sokoto state bordering Zamfara (Sabon Birni LGA), there are 30 different notable bandit commanders, yet all of them have traditionally been loyal to Bello Turji, one of the most infamous bandits in the northwest.[165]

The fluid organizational nature of banditry—coupled with the previously described challenges of conducting field research in any

be A recent study by the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies similarly emphasized the flexible nature of Lakurawa and noted that their attitudes toward local communities are shaped by the degree to which those communities accept them. Consequently, Hausa communities in Kebbi state reported more instances of cattle rustling to the study authors than those in Tangaza and Gudu. See Mustapha Alhassan, Oyewole Oginni, and Claudia Breitung, "Countering Lakurawa Recruitment in Northwest Nigeria," Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies, September 2025.

bf Nevertheless, in the course of conducting this research, the authors had several experiences interviewing sources outside the main areas of Lakurawa operations in Sokoto and Kebbi in which sources described an attack as being perpetrated by Lakurawa but, when pressed as to how they could identify the perpetrators, acknowledged that they could not be certain and that it was more likely the assailants were bandits. Based on their understanding of how conflict incidents in the northwest are reported, the authors suspect that some of the attacks that have been reported in Nigerian media (or on social media) since late 2024 as being the work of Lakurawa may have in fact been the work of bandits. For the purposes of this section on Lakurawa, the authors draw only from interviews with sources who had first-hand experiences with Lakurawa and whose descriptions of the militants clearly indicated that they were jihadis (e.g., preaching, sharia enforcement) rather than bandits.

conflict zone—make mapping bandit influence and power more difficult than mapping even jihadi areas of attack or control in Nigeria, given that the latter operate more like classic insurgents and (contra bandits) often claim their attacks in one way or another. Consequently, this section of the present study employs some admittedly vague or subjective labels regarding the relative influence of bandits, as such traits are quite difficult to quantify.

However, the authors' assessments reflect the views of the dozens of respondents whom they interviewed in the banditry-afflicted regions of the northwest, many of whom articulated a clear consensus that certain bandits are highly powerful (one might call them warlords[166]) and exercise influence over many smaller but still deadly gang leaders. These respondents also noted that certain regions and states are bandit "strongholds." Specifically, the epicenter of the banditry crisis has long been in Zamfara state,[167] which respondents also stated constitutes the base for most of the warlords in the region. In the states neighboring Zamfara (Katsina, Sokoto, Kaduna, Niger, and Kebbi), those LGAs that are adjacent to the boundaries with Zamfara are typically more impacted by banditry than those LGAs that are further removed, which itself represents an emerging political geography of banditry that can be divided into overlapping and shifting zones of bandit "cores," "tribute zones," and "raiding territories."[168] (See Figure 9.)

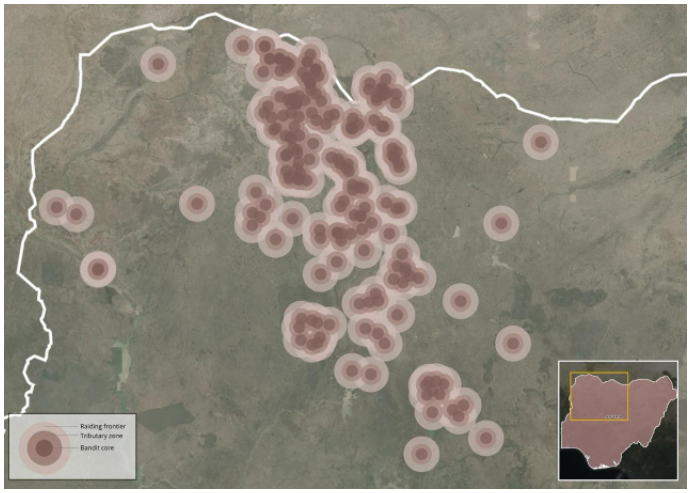

Figure 9: The overlap of core, tributary, and bandit raiding zones in northwest Nigeria. (Source: DIIS with data from Peer Schouten and James Barnett, reproduced with permission). Note: The location of bandit camps is approximate as of late 2024 and broadly corresponds, though not fully, with the present authors' map of major bandit camps (see Figure 10) due to use of different data sources and different inclusion criteria.

The second aspect of banditry that is relevant here, as detailed in a previous study in this publication, is that banditry presents opportunities and challenges for jihadis who seek to expand into western Nigeria.[169] On the one hand, those parts of Nigeria suffering from banditry present advantages to jihadis that are seeking to expand or relocate. For starters, banditry erodes what little state presence previously existed in rural Nigeria, contributing to the inability of security forces to establish a permanent and widespread presence across rural communities and thereby creating what might be dubbed "illicitly governed enclaves."[170] In such enclaves, there are ample opportunities for jihadis to make a profit, typically by partnering with bandits in activities such as kidnapping for ransom and cattle rustling or by selling weapons to gangs or instructing them in IED making (for a price). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, bandits offer jihadis a foil: In their effort to earn popular support for their insurgencies from Muslim communities, jihadis present themselves as a contrast to—and, indeed, protection from—those bandits who indiscriminately raid and terrorize communities across Nigeria's northwest without any ideological pretense. Whether in the case of Ansaru in Kaduna, Mahmuda in Niger and Kwara, or Lakurawa in Sokoto, time and again jihadis have presented themselves as security providers to desperate rural communities[bg] that the state has been unable to protect. In other words, the presence of banditry not only provides jihadis with financial opportunities, but also the opportunity to develop new constituencies within the broader population.

On the other hand, Nigerian banditry presents an immensely complex set of conflict dynamics that jihadis often struggle to navigate. Jihadis have struggled to coopt bandits due to an array of factors, including a lack of ideological and strategic alignment between bandits and jihadis; the bandits' reluctance to surrender their autonomy to jihadis who hail from a different part of Nigeria (and are typically of different ethnicities[bh]); friction over the behavior of bandits, such as drug and alcohol use and even bandit hairstyles that jihadis consider vices; and the loose organization and frequent fracturing of bandit gangs.[171] In short, bandits make for difficult partners and may quickly become enemies.

Moreover, there is an obvious tension between the different benefits that jihadis seek to accrue from operating in areas affected by banditry. Jihadis seek to profit from banditry, which necessitates some degree of cooperation, while at the same time they position themselves as superior to bandits and indeed as a defense against them. In other words, to garner both sets of benefits from banditry, jihadis would need to *both* cooperate and fight with bandits.

Examples of Jihadi-Bandit Relations

Sadiku's JAS cell struck what was likely the most effective balance of profiting from banditry while still presenting itself as a superior alternative and security guarantor to local communities, particularly the Gwari villages of Chikun LGA in Kaduna. Upon his relocation to the northwest, Sadiku developed a close relationship with Dogo Gide among several other bandits. Underpinning this arrangement, at least initially, was Sadiku's flexible approach to the bandits. As one of his former associates described it:

> *Sadiku brought his own soldiers and weapons from Shekau and said to the bandits, "You have your own space, we have our own space. This is our camp, and you can have your own. You won't be under us, we won't be under you." So, they agreed to stay in the same area but operate independently.*[172]

Sadiku was careful not to preach jihadi ideology too much to the bandits (although Dogo Gide expressed some interest),[173] and

bg These are almost exclusively Muslim communities, with the exception of Sadiku's relationship with Christian Gwaris in Kaduna. Barnett, Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz, "Jihadization of Banditry;" Barnett and Rufa'i, "A 'Sahelian' or a 'Littoral' Crisis?"; and Rufa'i, "Importing Militant Jihadists."

bh This is notable insofar as bandits typically justify their militancy through the lens of ethnic conflict, echoing the grievances of Fulani pastoralist communities in the northwest. Since the Nigerian jihad has largely drawn from a different set of communities in the northeast, bandits often find that the grievances that motivate Nigeria's jihadis are quite different from their own.

he cautioned his fighters not to be overly judgmental of the bandits and their un-Islamic ways, noting that in Kaduna, "[the situation] was different from Sambisa" where the jihadi project was "more advanced."[174]

Yet even Sadiku's lax attitude toward the bandits could not sustain this *modus vivendi* forever, as a bandit that is an ally one day might become an enemy the next. Dogo Gide and Sadiku fell out in late 2024 and began clashing, reportedly because Sadiku was "arrogant [and] demands respect" from the bandits, according to a former associate of Sadiku's.[175] "But to the bandits, Sadiku is an immigrant," this source continued. "The forest belongs to them, so how can someone from Borno come and take over the forest?"[176]

All of the jihadi groups profiled in this study have pursued both carrot and stick in managing relations with bandits, sometimes simultaneously. Operating in a stretch of Niger and Kwara states that are suffering from banditry yet relatively far removed from the epicenter of the banditry crisis in Zamfara, Mahmuda's group set about fighting local bandits as part of the accommodation it reached with local communities (including Fulani community leaders). In a lengthy 2025 audio message circulated within Borgu, one of Mahmuda's associates, identifying himself as Idi Gurmu, boasted about a time when he and three of Mahmuda's "students" rescued seven people from Kemanji community in Kwara who had been kidnapped by a small gang of a dozen bandits, a favor that Mahmuda did for the people of Kemanji without demanding "even 10 Naira" (less than a dollar) in return.[177] Even a local vigilante leader acknowledged that "[Mahmudawa] even intervened to stop banditry in Kemanji. If someone was kidnapped, they would fight the bandits to rescue the victim."[178]

One source in Kwara attributed these efforts against the bandits to Mahmuda's reputational concerns:

> *One notable bandit leader was Babuga Dogo, who was eventually killed. Initially, there was an agreement between Malam Mahmuda and the bandits, but that changed when an attack occurred. Malam Mahmuda had been accused of colluding with them, although he denied it. As a result, he attacked the bandits and successfully drove them away from Kaiama … The relationship between Malam Mahmmudou's followers and the bandits has soured; they are now enemies. Mallam Mahmuda feels that the bandits have tarnished his reputation.*[179]

Yet at the same time, the jihadis have been unable to resist the allure of profiting from banditry. Mahmuda's men, whether with their commander's knowledge or without, appear to have colluded with local bandits for profit. One source recounted an incident in Kwara state:

> *There was one man that was kidnapped, so his brother went to the traditional leader … The traditional ruler said when he spoke to Mahmuda, [Mahmuda] told him it was done by Fulani but that he will look for them … After [the traditional ruler] arrested the Fulani, the culprit said it was Mahmuda's boys that asked them to do [the kidnapping] and share the money since Mahmuda will not allow his boys to do it.*[180]

To speak of a general approach of jihadis toward bandits or vice versa, therefore, is to miss the point, as none of these jihadi groups have ever been entirely consistent or categorical in their approach toward bandits. Rather, necessity, proximity, personality, and other factors all combine to determine which bandit gangs jihadis cooperate with and which they confront.

A "Goldilocks Effect"?

If banditry presents both opportunities and challenges for jihadis, then it is not a stretch to presume that jihadis, provided they are rational actors, would seek to maximize the benefits of operating in regions afflicted by banditry while minimizing attendant risks. Given the fluid nature of the banditry crisis, this might be reflected geographically (i.e., some areas within western Nigeria might prove more fertile grounds for a jihadi insurgency than other areas depending on various local conflict dynamics). At the start of this research, the authors hypothesized that jihadis find more success, either as part of a conscious strategy or simply through repeated probing of new environs (i.e., a "trial and error" approach), in areas where bandits have sufficiently weakened the state and created desperation in rural communities but are insufficiently organized to resist the jihadis. This is because, as the cases of Lakurawa, Ansaru in Kaduna, and Sadiku's network show, jihadis seem to have more success when they fight smaller gangs to gain popular support yet avoid direct confrontation with—and maybe even cooperate with—more powerful bandits.

Leveraging a combination of qualitative and quantitative data that they have been collecting on non-state actors in western Nigeria over the past four years, the authors attempt to capture these dynamics in the figure below, which shows the area of operations of different jihadi groups between 2020 and 2025 alongside the areas of influence of major bandits. Crucially, the map does not attempt to show all bandit gangs operating in the region but instead focuses on the most influential warlords, an admittedly subjective judgment that is nonetheless informed by significant collective research experience in the region. The locations of bandits indicated on the map are approximate and refer to those bandits' main areas of influence, though bandits are highly mobile, meaning that their operations are not necessarily confined to those locations.

As the map indicates, jihadi groups have been more successful in establishing a presence along the peripheries of the region where bandits operate as opposed to in its epicenter. Notably, Zamfara, the aforementioned bandit "stronghold," has not witnessed a sizable or stable jihadi presence in the past five years. Lakurawa and Mahmuda's group have both operated in neighboring states affected by banditry—Sokoto, Kebbi, and Niger states, respectively—but they have operated principally in the fringes of these states closer to the international borders with Benin and Niger, while the parts of those states that are most heavily impacted by banditry (typically the LGAs sharing boundaries with Zamfara) are not associated with as meaningful or sustained a jihadi presence. While at least two jihadi networks, Sadiku's group and Ansaru, established a presence in parts of Kaduna and Niger states that arguably form part of the core territory of the banditry crisis, both of these jihadi experiments ultimately proved unstable, with bandits attacking and at least partially dislodging them, as described previously.

The authors' thesis would benefit from further testing (hopefully facilitated by organizations investing more in collecting and publishing relevant conflict data), but the findings from their fieldwork also strongly point to some sort of "Goldilocks effect:" Whether as part of a conscious strategy or simply as a consequence of probing, jihadis are finding it easiest to operate in parts of western Nigeria where bandits are antagonizing local communities and creating profitable "illicit enclaves" but are relatively removed from the core base of bandit power, i.e., Zamfara and adjacent parts of neighboring states. In the latter territories, the major warlords

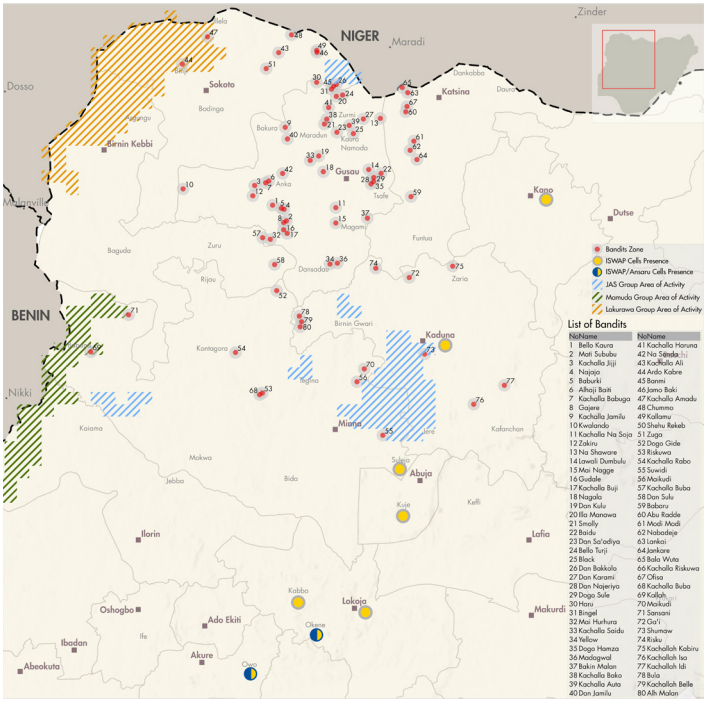

Figure 10: A map of major bandit warlords and jihadi groups in western Nigeria. The map shows jihadi activity at any point between 2020 and 2025 and does not necessarily indicate current areas of operation. Bandits are highly mobile, and their locations are approximate. (Source: Authors, using their own data from open-source and field research; additional data provided by Clingendael Institute)

increasingly view jihadis as potential threats to their local influence.

Lakurawa's experience has been indicative of this trend. In parts of Sokoto (e.g., Balle) and Kebbi (e.g., Argungu) where there is a degree of banditry driven by an assemblage of (relatively) smaller gangs, Lakurawa appears to have succeeded. Respondents noted that in Balle, for example, Lakurawa had largely "displaced" the bandits, allowing local farmers to "return to their fields without fear."[181] In the epicenter of the banditry crisis in Zamfara, by contrast, Lakurawa has not established the same degree of presence to date. As one respondent in Zamfara stated: "The Lakurawa cannot easily establish their base in Zamfara as they did in Sokoto. This is because in Sokoto they came en masse, and you know the bandits there are not as strong as those in Zamfara State."[182] A source in Kebbi similarly explained, "Bandits view Lakurawa with caution. Lakurawa utilizes informants among the bandits to navigate their movements. When bandits commit attacks, it often reflects poorly on Lakurawa, as the community associates such violence with them."[183] Lakurawa therefore seems to have had more success operating in areas occupied by less powerful bandits whom they have an easier time overpowering or recruiting into their fold as opposed to having to negotiate an uneasy relationship with powerful warlords (see subsequent section). As one local researcher in the northwest summarized the situation, "Any area you see an established bandit, Lakurawa will avoid it. They are targeting the emerging bandits [for recruitment] instead."[184]

Jihadis Coopting Bandits, or Bandits Using Jihadis?

While this study has primarily adopted a jihadi-centric lens, it might be helpful to flip perspectives and consider briefly how bandits potentially view jihadi expansion. The authors have suggested that jihadis find more success in a sort of "middle-ground" area with regard to banditry (i.e., where bandits are present and harming communities but not at their strongest). This could be further explained by considering two sets of bandits—more powerful warlords and smaller gangs (notwithstanding the aforementioned caveats regarding the subjectivity of those labels)—and how their relative positions might shape their decisions to either accommodate or resist jihadi encroachment.

More powerful bandit warlords might selectively cooperate with jihadis up until a point when they fear excessive jihadi encroachment will undermine their own influence, at which point they might adopt a hostile attitude toward the jihadis. This can be illustrated through the case of the notorious warlord Dogo Gide (discussed below). Conversely, smaller gang leaders or those in more vulnerable positions vis-à-vis rival gangs may align with jihadi groups due to an inability to resist the jihadis or as a means of gaining leverage over their more powerful bandit rivals i.e., out of a position of relative weakness. Yet even in those situations, bandits still exercise agency and might end up being less-than-ideal partners for jihadis, as demonstrated by Lakurawa's experience with bandits, also detailed further below.

The powerful bandit warlord Dogo Gide demonstrates the challenges that jihadis face in expanding into 'core' bandit territory (i.e., Zamfara state and adjacent LGAs in neighboring states). Dogo Gide, a native of the northwest and officially one of the 'most-wanted' bandits in the region, has long attracted the interest of Nigerian officials and analysts of Nigeria's banditry crisis given rumors of his alignment with different jihadi factions and his occasional adoption of jihadi rhetoric in audios and videos.[185] Yet, as the first author has previously argued, Dogo Gide's relationship with jihadis has historically been opportunistic and lacking the strong ideological alignment that some analysts assumed.[186] Indeed, in recent years, his gang has emerged as a major rival to multiple jihadi factions in the northwest.

The authors' understanding is that Dogo Gide facilitated the arrival of several jihadi groups into the northwest after 2018, when he was alleged to have killed the then-most powerful bandit, Buharin Daji, in a personal dispute.[187] Gide's welcoming of jihadis at this time may have been partially reflective of a sincere desire to transform into a more ideologically motivated and credentialed militant. As a former pastoralist lacking any significant Islamic (or Western) education, interlocuters suggest that he may genuinely wish to become seen as a more pious individual, which may have made him receptive to some elements of jihadi preaching by groups like Ansaru and Sadiku's JAS.[188] [bi] Gide has also undoubtedly used his relations with jihadis to boost his own stature among fellow bandits and leverage this in his dealings with local communities and state authorities, however, indicating a pragmatic interest in forging jihadi ties as well.[189]

Moreover, not only has Dogo Gide recently been deeply involved in intra-bandit politics in a manner that a full-fledged member

bi One individual who had negotiated hostage releases with Dogo Gide, quoted in Schouten and Barnett, also commented on Dogo Gide's poor upbringing and continued dishevelled appearance in the bush: 'If you see Dogo Gide, you'll pity him [because he looks poor]. He's nothing to write home about. For three months, he cannot even change his clothes." See "Divided They Rule?" p. 25.

of a jihadi group would not,[bj] he has also emerged as a staunch defender of bandit "turf" from jihadi encroachment in recent years, as demonstrated by clashes with Ansaru in 2024[190] and with Sadiku in early 2025. A source who knows Dogo Gide explained:

> *[Ansaru] and Sadiku's group have both asked Dogo Gide to accept the ideology and surrender control of the environment to the jihadists. But Dogo Gide disagreed, he said he can't allow that to happen because they're not from here. They came from the northeast.*[191]

In a video that Dogo Gide filmed following his gang's ambush of Sadiku's men, the bandit can be heard justifying his feud on the grounds that the jihadis have harmed civilians under Dogo Gide's protection through their use of roadside IEDs.[192] Interestingly, he appears to have indeed taken rhetorical cues from the jihadis, but in this instance, he flips it against the jihadis, accusing them of hypocrisy by harming Muslims and urging Sadiku to "repent before it's too late."[193]

One should not entirely discount the potential for Dogo Gide (or another powerful warlord) to undergo a genuine ideological transformation into a jihadi entrepreneur in the future. But for now, the evidence strongly suggests that Dogo Gide, despite having benefited from his past cooperation with jihadis, sees himself as in control of that relationship. He has indicated that he is not interested in surrendering influence over the northwest and has the power to, at minimum, complicate jihadi efforts to expand there, if not necessarily halting them altogether.

Yet, few bandits in the northwest have the same influence as Dogo Gide apart from several other of the most powerful warlords such as Bello Turji, the aforementioned "oga" (top bandit boss) in most of eastern Sokoto and parts of western Zamfara. Most other gang leaders navigate a complex landscape in which they operate largely autonomously on a day-to-day basis with their group of core fighters but must maintain alliances with and provide occasional support to more powerful bandits. Bandit alliances are constantly shifting, and these dynamics, in turn, influence the success or failure of jihadi probing.

In Sokoto state, the authors' research suggests that several of the less powerful bandits have begun working with Lakurawa out of a position of relative weakness amid the shifting landscape of bandit competition and power. In Binji in central Sokoto, one of the communities where Lakurawa has had a growing presence since 2024 as part of their southward expansion, a respondent recalled how one gang leader, reportedly "unaffiliated" with a larger warlord, joined Lakurawa but then attempted to use his new position to his advantage:

> *Some of the bandits in this community that joined the Lakurawa include Kwalho, who has joined Lakurawa because he was overpowered by them and he could have been killed he if refused to join them. But mind you, despite [Lakurawa's] positive aim of handling banditry, Kwalho used the opportunity to his advantage as well [to continue his banditry].*[194]

In another case the authors heard of, a bandit known as Lawali Zakiru began cooperating with Lakurawa in Sokoto as a means of exacting revenge on the powerful warlord Bello Turji. Zakiru had previously been aligned with Turji's biggest local rivals in Sokoto state, the gang of the brothers Dullu and Bashari Maniya.[195] Turji's gang killed Dullu in 2022,[196] causing the latter's gang to fragment, which left Zakiru to align with various bandits in Zamfara before eventually aligning with Lakurawa at some point in 2025 with the aim of fighting Turji.[197] This underscores an interesting phenomenon, in which a weaker bandit (Zakiru) aligned with jihadis to fight a more powerful warlord (Turji). Moreover, aligning with jihadis is merely one possible option available to bandits looking to get back at a rival or reposition themselves vis-à-vis other bandits. Other members of the late Dullu's gang joined different bandits in Zamfara.[bk] Meanwhile, Dullu's brother, Bashari, defected to the government and assisted the security forces in operations against Turji in 2025 (these operations failed, and Turji killed Bashari in a confrontation in June 2025).[198]

The authors' research would indicate that Lakurawa has, for the most part, not recruited bandits en masse.[bl] Doing so could undermine its efforts to gain popular legitimacy in the northwest amid heightened intercommunal tensions. Yet, the limited cases the authors heard of in which the group has begun cooperating with bandits offer insight into the different ways in which bandits may attempt to leverage jihadi presence to their own ends, just as Dogo Gide's experience shows the reasons why bandits might switch from an accommodating attitude to a hostile one. Among other implications, these findings would suggest that jihadis are likely to face significant continued resistance to expansion and consolidation in Zamfara and parts of neighboring states in the near future, the region the authors would argue constitutes 'core' bandit territory. Unfortunately, this has not diminished the threat of jihadi activity elsewhere in 'western Nigeria,' as the following section intends to make clear.

The Social Glue of Expansion: Commanders, Kinship, and Clerics

Jihadis have managed to establish a presence outside northeastern Nigeria, and not merely or even principally in the most conflict-affected regions where one might expect the Nigerian state to have the weakest remit and limited capacity to stop jihadi expansion (e.g., swathes of the northwest). Jihadi networks have also emerged in relatively stabler areas such as Kogi and southwestern Nigeria. The ethnic and religious makeups of these states are quite different than in either the northeast or the northwest, such that one might expect the jihadi groups examined in this study to face skepticism as they attempt to recruit in those states.

Two groups, ISWAP and Ansaru, have circumvented this challenge to an extent by leveraging old connections to an overlooked local jihadi scene in Kogi state, which has, in turn, established a presence in southwestern Nigeria and begun to recruit there. These connections are at once ideological—Kogi jihadis have

bj The authors' sources have shown evidence that Dogo Gide remains active in an informal network of senior bandits in the northwest who coordinate to some extent on strategy and messaging among the gangs, and that he is actively trying to recruit jihadi defectors (notably, specialists such as bombmakers) to his group, rather than volunteering his men for a jihadi cause.

bk For example, several members of this gang joined the bandit Jammu Smally in Maradun LGA of Zamfara, while others relocated to Kaura Namoda LGA of Zamfara. Author's interviews, Zamfara repentant bandits #1 and #2, July 2025.

bl Other researchers are of the view that Lakurawa has recently begun recruiting more bandits, including Malik Samuel, who engaged in fieldwork in the northwest on this topic in late 2025. Author correspondence, Malik Samuel, November 2025.

been recruited from segments of the local salafi community that already held highly exclusivist views of other Muslims (e.g., Sufis)—and social, with personal relationships between members of the Kogi jihadi scene persisting despite—and sometimes overriding—the organizational divides between ISWAP and Ansaru. The result is a complex jihadi scene that, in ISWAP's case, formed the hinge of an ambitious expansionary effort that at one point threatened to destabilize Abuja, as detailed previously. Yet the genesis of this strategic jihadi effort can be traced back to a handful of clerics engaged in often hyper-local religious debates in the 1990s.

From Rival Mallams to 'Frenemy' Jihadis: The Shared Roots of Jihad in Kogi

As in other parts of northern Nigeria, Kogi state, and particularly the Ebira community, had experienced significant intra-Muslim turbulence from the 1990s onward, with the rise of different salafi and "reformist" groups (broadly defined) challenging traditional Sufi dominance of key mosques.[199] The Ebira community had embraced Islam later than many other communities in northern Nigeria, which widespread conversion to Islam only occurring in the early 20th century.[200] Parts of the community have maintained a strong attachment to traditional religion,[201] which led to tensions between Muslim activists and salafis on the one hand and traditional spiritualists on the other from the 1970s onward—for example, clashes between traditional masquerade dancers and Muslim activists had occurred in Okene town (the de facto administrative headquarters of Ebiraland) during annual festivals since the early 1990s.[202] Many figures in the Ebira salafi community had studied outside of the state at major northern universities such as Bayero University Kano (BUK) or Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) in Zaria,[203] where Muslims are a larger majority than in relatively heterogenous Kogi and where, by the 1990s, there was growing Muslim student activism on campus.[204] Ebira students in the northern universities, being far from home, found a sense of community by joining existing salafi organizations or even forming their own Ebira groups for *dawa*, and some of them are believed to have connected with *Yusufiyya* members in this way.[205] [bm]

Two figures emerged as major players in the Ebira salafi scene in the 1990s: Mallam Baba and Mallam Mustapha (real name Mustapha Idris), initially partners and eventually enemies whose rivalry continues to influence the Ebira jihadi milieu to this day. While Baba had studied at BUK, Mustapha studied in Maiduguri in the 1990s.[206] Baba showed a proclivity for extremist activism from early on, and one associate claims his followers were the first to kill a traditional masquerader in 1993,[bn] which forced him to flee Okene for some years due to the risk of reprisal from traditionalists.[207] After Baba returned from exile to Okene sometime between 1998 and 2000,[bo] he found himself with few followers and began attending the sermons of Sheikh Luqman Musa Galadima (a prominent figure in the Kogi salafi scene[bp] and in state politics).[208] Mallam Mustapha likewise returned to Okene from the northeast sometime between 1996 and 2000[209] [bq] and, along with other salafis, established a congregation at the self-named *Markaz Alhus Sunnah wal-Jama'ah* in Okene.[210] Baba, dissatisfied with Luqman's "quietist" approach, was drawn to Mustapha's preachings on jihad and the two became "close friends."[211] Mustapha was vehemently anti-Sufi—more so than Mohammed Yusuf, whose ideological disputes were often with his erstwhile salafi mentors—and would organize and film his supporters destroying Sufi shrines in Ebiraland.[212]

Baba and Mustapha fell out sometime around 2005, however—reportedly over Baba's accusation that Mustapha was having an affair with a local prostitute whom he was supposed to be leading in *ruqya* (Islamic spiritual healing).[213] After a failed mediation effort by Sheikh Luqman, the two clerics' supporters eventually clashed, resulting in Mallam Baba's death,[br] while Mallam Mustapha was apparently eventually arrested by DSS for inciting his supporters to violence.[214]

bm A March 2025 speech by Sheikh Yaqeen as-Shinqitee, a salafi cleric and former associate of the jihadi cleric Mallam Baba, likewise emphasized the significance of studying at ABU Zaria in the "awakening" of religious activism. As the Sheikh says of his own experience: "So, we were into this, when we went to Zaria, we started discovering that there were so many things we believed in that do not have any evidence in Islam … So, when we came home, and we started hearing [Mallam Raji] had accepted tareeqah [Sufism], we decided to fight him, so that if God loves him but if he goes to accept the jinn we can leave him." MASWAJ Da'wah Nigeria, "A brief history; The struggles and birth of Markaz Ahlis-sunnah wal'Jamā'ah, Okene, Kogi state," Facebook post, March 28, 2025 (video in Ebira language, translation on file with authors).

bn The source the authors interviewed (Ebira mallam #2) placed the incident in 1992, but a recent newspaper column by an Okene resident who was a young man at the time places the incident in 1993, while Sheikh as-Shinqitee likewise places the killings around 1993-1994 and notes that the killings forced Mallam Baba's group to leave Ebiraland. See "Yelwata massacre: Between terrorism and communal crisis," Sun, June 25, 2025; and MASWAJ Da'wah Nigeria, "The struggles and birth of Markaz Ahlis-sunnah wal'Jamā'ah."

bo The authors' sources were not sure of the exact year of Mallam Baba's return to Okene.

bp Sheikh Luqman is affiliated with the Ansarul Islam movement rather than with Izala, and his followers are sometimes referred to locally as either "Ansarudeen" or the "Sunni" group. His father was, in fact, a prominent cleric in the Tijaniyya Sufi order who was chief imam of the Okene central mosque before his death in 2019. According to the authors' interviews, Sheikh Luqman's teachings have diverged from those of his father, and following the late Imam Galadima's death in 2019, Ebira salafis (referred to as Izala by local sources and media, although some of them may not formally be affiliated with Izala) supported Sheikh Luqman's candidacy to replace his father against a Tijanniya candidate. The dispute turned violent and resulted in scores of injuries. For more, see Ahmed Tahir Ajobe, "Tension Mounts Over Succession Battle in Okene Central Mosque," Daily Trust, May 31, 2020. See Footnote V for more on the "blurry" definition of salafis in Nigeria.

bq The authors' source claims that Mallam Mustapha returned to Okene in 2000, but a post from a long-deleted Facebook page belonging to Mallam Mustapha's markaz claims that the markaz formed in 1996, although it also notes that Mustapha had other associates at the time, which indicates that the center could have been opened before Mustapha had returned to Okene. A screenshot of the Facebook post can be found on Jacob Zenn's web archive of Boko Haram-related material at "Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria."

br Other sources say he was detained or "disappeared" by the security agencies (e.g., author's interview, Kogi official #3, November 2024). In any case, Baba's group continued to operate in the 2010s after his death, while Mallam Mustapha seems to have publicly preached from his markaz until at least August 2012, as he delivered a sermon criticizing Baba's supporters for an August 2012 attack on a church in Okene. Video and translation of the speech on file with the authors.

Some of the Okene jihadis eventually joined JAS[bs] (and later ISWAP) or Ansaru[bt] and possibly even went for training abroad with the latter,[bu] but it seems that most did not go to the northeast. They instead focused their ultra-*takfiri* attitudes[bv] on fighting local authorities, Sufis, and traditionalists within Kogi state.[215] Their parochial vision and extreme animosity toward other Nigerian Muslims was apparently off-putting to some *Yusufiyya*: One Nigerian analyst, Fulan Nasrullah, had described meeting some of the "Okene brothers" in the mid-2000s to discuss the possibility of traveling to Iraq or Afghanistan to fight U.S. forces.[216] He recalled being perplexed by Okene jihadis' reverence of Anwar al-Awlaki[bw] and wrote that "they terrified us to the extent that we cut short our stay and afterwards broke contact with them."[217]

As such, between 2012 and 2015, while JAS was waging its own insurgency in the northeast, a local network of jihadis in Okene began carrying out a series of bombings and shootings in Okene and Lokoja that were never formally claimed but were attributed by locals to the "Mallam Baba terrorist group" (despite Baba being dead by this time).[218] The targets of the attacks—masqueraders, traditional rulers, and churches[219]—pointed to the perpetrators' localized focus. After 2015-2016, when the military attacked a number of mosques and houses reportedly belonging to "Mallam Baba's" associates,[bx] these networks appeared largely dormant, until Kogi was again the epicenter of a local jihadi insurgency by 2022.

The 'Kachalla' Model of Jihad?

This historical context is crucial for understanding the subsequent reemergence in the 2020s of multiple jihadi networks in central Nigeria. Yet, these overlapping jihadi networks appear to have never fully consolidated under a single banner, and they appear prone to a degree of fragmentation. These dynamics bear additional examination.

From what the authors can discern, there is a good degree of overlap in the Venn diagram of ISWAP cell members in Kogi (particularly Abu Ikrima's network) and Ansaru members led or inspired by Abu Baraa. Members of each network know each other, and in some instances studied at the same salafi madrassas or had even participated in the *Markaz Alhus Sunnah wal-Jama'ah* together. One security official described the relationship between the two cells as that of "cousins" and explained that this is sometimes literally the case, with members of an extended family spread across the two cells.[220] The legacies of Mallam Baba and Mallam Mustapha seemingly continue to shape their interactions with each other and their approach to jihad.

From what the authors can piece together of Abu Ikrima's biography, it seems that he studied alongside future Ansaru and ISWAP members at a secondary school in Okene in the 2000s run by the prominent salafi cleric Sheikh Luqman,[221] the same cleric whom Mallam Baba and Mallam Mustafa had split from in the early 2000s for being insufficiently sympathetic to jihad.[by] Members of this secondary school and mosques affiliated with Sheikh Luqman were in turn recruited into study groups led by associates of Mallam Baba and Mallam Mustapha,[222] underscoring the fluidity between the hardline/proto-jihadi networks and the more 'mainstream' salafi community in Okene that still existed in the 2000s.

Abu Ikrima first came into the Nigerian jihadi orbit in the mid-/late 2000s through one of these members of Luqman's mosque, who would later become an Ansaru recruiter known by the *nom de guerre* Abu Junid.[223] He also spent time in Maiduguri in this period as a computer science student, in which context he likely came into contact with the *Yusufiyya* before returning to Kogi.[224] Whether Abu Ikrima then joined the emerging Ansaru network in Kogi in the early 2010s as one Crisis Group report has suggested[225] is somewhat unclear to the authors, as the sources consulted in this

bs One former student of Mallam Mustapha who was arrested in 2019 claimed in a media confession to have partaken in bombings (which were claimed by JAS) in and around Abuja in the mid-2010s as well as participating in bank robberies in Owo in neighboring Ondo (where Ansaru and ISWAP would later operate/reactivate). However, confessions such as these staged by police for the media are not always reliable as authorities sometimes conflate different plots and groups and push the suspects to do the same. Afeez Hanafi, "We used proceeds of bank robberies to buy explosives – Suspected Boko Haram commander," Punch, January 5, 2019.

bt Ansaru claimed a January 2013 attack in Kogi on a military convoy heading for peacekeeping mission in Mali, underscoring the group's early presence in the state. Daniel Prado Simón and Vincent Foucher, "The Life and Capture of Abu Bara, Leader of Ansaru," SARI Global, August 18, 2025. However, Ansaru recruited several ethnic Igala from a different part of Kogi state, who could have potentially facilitated the group's initial Kogi-based operations rather than the Mallam Baba/Mustapha networks. Jacob Zenn, *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2020), p. 202.

bu Sheikh as-Shinqitee suggests that his movement (which is focused on *dawa* rather than jihad and had therefore split with Mallam Baba) encouraged those who wanted to "hasten" the struggle (i.e., embark on jihad) to leave Okene for "Maiduguri or Sokoto, or if [they] are still not satisfied, go to Chad or Libya" but then worked to bring home some of those who had "gone to Libya" (possibly a reference to joining Ansaru, given AQIM's camps in Libya where Abu Baraa and others trained). As with most aspects of the Okene jihadi scene, references are often vague and details of specific individuals are difficult to verify. MASWAJ Da'wah Nigeria, "The struggles and birth of Markaz Ahlis-sunnah wal'Jamā'ah."

bv *Takfir* refers to the practice of excommunicating fellow Muslims. It is a highly contentious practice in Islam and a frequent source of disagreement among different salafi-jihadis. For example, opposing views regarding the scope of which Muslims can be considered apostates and thus valid targets for jihadi violence have contributed to the ideological and organizational divides between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State as well as between different jihadi factions in Nigeria. See, for example, Mohammed Hafez, "The Crisis Within Jihadism: The Islamic State's Populism vs. al-Qa'ida's Populism," *CTC Sentinel* 13:9 (2020). For a history of the Boko Haram conflict that insightfully emphasizes its "ultra-exclusivist" strain, and the debates and fissures within the movement this engendered, see Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (London: Hurst, 2016). For a deeper history of the centrality of *takfir* to earlier militant Islamic movements, see Cole Bunzel, *Wahhabism: The History of a Militant Islamic Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), particularly chapters 2-3 and the conclusion.

bw Nasrullah and his associates did not consider al-Awlaki a serious Islamic scholar and actually suspected him of being a CIA plant to entrap Muslims. Fulan Nasrullah, "Okene: The Long Awaited Battleground Between Nigeria and the Takfiris," Fulan's SITREP, October 13, 2015.

bx Former governor Yahaya Bello, who is himself from Okene, ordered the military to bulldoze several mosques belonging to the militants upon taking office. Author's interview, Ebira Mallam #2, February 2025; author's interviews, Kogi officials #1 and #2, November 2024. Other sources alleged the governor recruited some of Mallam Baba's associates to be his own political thugs as a condition for their release from detention. Author's interviews, Ebira civil society activists #1 and #2, November 2024; author's interview, intermediary #2, February 2025.

by Some sources claimed that these jihadis continue to send their children to Sheikh Luqman's school. The sheikh is known as "Abul Yatama" (the father of orphans) as his school often caters to orphans, which could be one reason that jihadi commanders find it easy to send their children there (i.e., people do not typically inquire about the students' parents). Author's interview, ex-ISWAP fighter #1 interview, October 2024; author's interview, intermediary #1 interview, January 2025.

research offer contradictory and vague details about this period of his life. When he was back in Kogi in the early/mid-2010s, sources said he became close to the future ISWAP commander Abu Qatada, who fled Okene after authorities attempted to arrest him for his role in what was then still dubbed the "Mallam Baba terror group" and eventually found his way to Lake Chad (where he joined ISWAP).[226bz] Crisis Group notes that Ikrima himself returned to the northeast sometime in the late 2010s, this time to join ISWAP, but was detained by ISWAP commander Mustapha Kirmima on suspicions of his links to Ansaru until 2021, when Habib Yusuf (Abu Musab al-Barnawi) purged Kirmima and released Ikrima.[227]

In any case, the somewhat confusing information the authors received from sources, if anything, underscores the extent to which, in the 2010s, the exact organizational affiliation of the different members of the Okene jihadi community were not always clear. Some of the Ebiraland jihadis were operating under the label of Ansaru in Kogi and several others traveling to the northeast to join JAS and later ISWAP, all while local authorities referred simply to "Mallam Baba's" terrorists causing disturbances in Okene.

By 2022, when Habib had tasked Ikrima with activating its network on behalf of ISWAP's expansionary agenda, Abu Baraa appears to have become the de facto leader of the remaining Ansaru network in Kogi and parts of the southwest (if separated from the Ansaru in Kaduna). Even after Abu Ikrima's network had begun conducting attacks on behalf of ISWAP, members of that network participated in operations conducted by Abu Barra's network and vice versa.[228] In some cases, there may have been a profit incentive to such cooperation—Ansaru engaged in a string of bank robberies from the late 2010s onward, and at least some members of the Kogi jihadi scene had a criminal background[229]—while in the case of the July 2022 Kuje prison break, cooperation between the different Kogi networks could have brought the benefit of extra manpower. But this does not fully explain the dynamic. Rather, it appears that Ikrima and Abu Baraa—or perhaps their subordinate commanders—saw their networks as largely autonomous and rooted in a common socioreligious community. Thus, Ikrima, despite his role within ISWAP, did not object to his men participating in Ansaru operations or Ansaru members participating in his own.

The question of *whose* jihad was being waged in Kogi might have looked quite different from the perspective of those fighting on the ground, far removed from the Lake Chad Basin, than it does to outside analysts, who often have a tendency to categorize jihadis into discrete groups and factions. One source who has debriefed former members of ISWAP and Ansaru in Kogi and the southwest explained, "There is more loyalty from fighters to particular commanders rather than to a specific group … These fighters don't necessarily understand the differences between the groups too much."[230] The source compared the dynamics to banditry, in which allegiances are fluid and cooperation between gangs is commonplace: "A bandit can sleep in Kaduna and then some guys come up and say they're doing a raid in [Zamfara] and so he joins."[231]

One might dub this the '*kachalla*' model of jihad after the term bandits use to describe gang leaders. Eschewing the more formalized hierarchy of jihadi groups, bandit gangs are organized loosely around individual *kachallas*, or commanders, who may themselves have overlapping loyalties—e.g., a gang leader might be a *kachalla* to his foot soldiers even as he sees himself as an associate of a more influential or senior bandit.[232] The authors' understanding of the ISWAP and Ansaru cells in Kogi, and the broader southwest and north central regions, paints a similarly complex picture.

Despite the apparent symbiosis between ISWAP and Ansaru in Kogi, they never fully merged. One might have assumed that in 2022, Abu Baraa, then seemingly devoid of any serious external sponsor, would have joined Ikrima in rallying to ISWAP, the group appearing dominant within the Nigerian jihadi scene after its killing of Shekau in 2021. Instead, Abu Baraa's network continued operating independently, even as its members apparently supported Ikrima and vice versa. Unfortunately, the authors could not discern with any precision why this was the case. It may have been that some of the Kogi jihadis, still as hyper-focused on the local jihad in Ebiraland as Fulan Nasrullah recalls them being, were not enticed by the prospects of being affiliated with a global jihadi group like the Islamic State via ISWAP (while others clearly were, as described below). Relatedly, if the fragmentation and continuous evolution of the Nigerian jihadi landscape is any indication, it may have been the case that Abu Baraa simply opted to maintain autonomy rather than subordinate himself to ISWAP—which would track with the aforementioned evidence that he had fallen out with the Ansaru faction in Kaduna (and would also not make Abu Baraa the only jihadi entrepreneur operating outside the northeast with an independent streak[ca]). Other sources indicated that the old divisions between Mallam Baba and Mallam Mustapha also played a role in preventing a full merger between the networks. As one security official noted, "Extremism and certain views bind [Ansaru and ISWAP], ethnicity and previous experience and clerics bind them … Sheikh Mustapha and Sheikh Baba, issues like this bind but also separate them."[233]

Ideological and organizational divisions are not irrelevant to dynamics in Kogi. Rather, the case of Kogi shows how ideological and organizational divisions interact with the meso-social factors the authors have described to influence the trajectory of jihadi networks. Put differently, ideological debates and organizational

bz Ikrima was also said to have attended study sessions under one Abu Muslim, another figure in the Mallam Baba/Mustapha networks. Author's interview, ex-ISWAP fighter #1, October 2024; author's interview, intermediary #1, January 2025.

ca While it is beyond the scope of this article, a former ISWAP qaid known as Adam Bitri appears to have been an important early figure in jihadi efforts at expansion in the northwest, and his experience may be illuminating. As the first author noted in a previous study, Bitri defected to the Nigerian intelligence services around 2017 before escaping from a government safehouse and joining Ansaru, from which he again defected and attempted to join Sadiku's JASDJ outfit, only to be killed by Sadiku for having betrayed Abubakar Shekau earlier in his jihadi career. See Barnett, Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz, "Jihadization of Banditry" as well as Malik Samuel, "Boko Haram teams up with bandits in Nigeria," Institute of Security Studies ISS Today, March 3, 2021. Several of the former jihadis interviewed for this research were former associates of Adam Bitri and one, a childhood friend, referred to Bitri as "[being] tempted by worldly things … he was proud." (Author's interview, ex-JAS fighter #5.) While it is unclear what relationship Bitri had to Abu Baraa personally beyond the former's brief association with Ansaru circa 2019, Bitri's case is telling of the degree to which pride, fear, or other personal interests can motivate how jihadi commanders align or break with different factions. The relative distance of jihadi cells in western Nigeria from the core of the jihadi conflict in the northeast may also afford commanders in the former more freedom in how they associate and operate, since they are typically far removed from the leadership of the groups that might punish them for intransigence.

distinctions might matter to some individuals more than others. For example, the individual who reportedly brought Abu Ikrima into the jihadi sphere, Abu Junid, was originally a member of Ansaru but defected to ISWAP over the issue of the 'caliphate,' i.e., because he felt it was obligatory for Muslims to serve the entity that was proclaiming itself to be the *true* Islamic state.[234] Ikrima too believed that he was fighting on behalf of a rightful caliphate, according to his associates.[235]

But this did not stop Ikrima from continuing to work closely with Ansaru, and many of the fighters under him might not have been so attuned to any ideological differences between ISWAP's leadership and Abu Baraa and may have instead seen their work as a more-or-less common jihad fought under different commanders. Moreover, when Ikrima fell out with ISWAP following the failure of his second phase of attacks in central Nigeria in late 2022, he relied on Ansaru networks to shelter him, as he feared retaliation from ISWAP.[236] Thus, while Ikrima's support for ISWAP's ideology was likely not superficial, it was his old social networks, rather than any allegiance rooted in ideological conviction, that he fell back on when he was most in need.

The current state of the jihadi scene in Kogi is difficult for the authors to discern, especially following Abu Baraa's arrest in 2025. As noted previously, ISWAP appears to have shifted away at least temporarily from a Kogi-centered expansion after several setbacks, but there are signs that jihadi cells of one affiliation or another remain active in Kogi and neighboring states.[cb] With ISWAP and possibly what remains of Abu Baraa's Ansaru network likely looking to expand farther into the southwest in the future,[237] the *kachalla* model will continue to be a relevant (if necessarily imperfect) frame of understanding expansion. While ISWAP could conceivably rally more jihadi factions to its banner, ISWAP's Lake Chad-based leadership would nonetheless be unlikely to micromanage operations on the other side of the country and would instead rely on relatively autonomous cell commanders who, in turn, would aim to coopt existing social networks in the region.

Conclusion

The relocation and expansion of jihadis within Nigeria is a highly complex phenomenon. Beyond the challenges of finding reliable sources and assessing conflicting data, studies such as this one struggle with trying to 'hit a moving target' so to speak, as developments on the ground often outpace efforts to collect insights from the field, analyze them, and produce a publishable assessment. The authors humbly suggest that this research, however, has value beyond the particular details of individual group movements or commanders' histories and has notable implications for strategies aimed at containing and curtailing jihadi violence in the region, and likely beyond.

The authors' findings on the importance of social dynamics in jihadi expansion have significant bearing on threat forecasting and attendant policy responses. Much of the discourse around jihadi expansion in West Africa centers around the 'spillover' of jihadi violence from the Sahel into 'coastal' West Africa, yet these terms can be somewhat misleading: Nigeria is arguably part of both the Sahel and coastal West Africa, depending on whether one is referring to the country's far north or south. For several years, Nigeria's counterterrorism strategy, supported by partners such as the United States and United Kingdom, has effectively been to contain the jihadi threat to the northeast and degrade it there, to prevent jihadis from exploiting insecurity and limited state presence elsewhere in Nigeria that could allow them to expand their influence and link up with Sahelian jihadis. Moreover, by containing jihadi violence to the northeast, the thinking goes, the state can protect the federal capital and other population centers as well as vital economic infrastructure throughout the country (e.g., roads, pipelines, and the ports in southern Nigeria) from terrorism and the associated political and economic costs. These concerns of spillover, whether in Nigeria or 'coastal' West Africa as a whole, are valid, yet the question remains about which parts of Nigeria/the region are at highest risk.

It seems clear that southwestern Nigeria faces a higher risk of jihadi violence in the coming years than the other regions of 'coastal' Nigeria, and this cannot simply be reduced to the fact that the southwest is home to a more sizable Muslim population than the rest of southern Nigeria. Those jihadis already operating in the southwest are not necessarily distinguishing between Muslims and Christians among the Yorùbá population as they attempt to stoke farmer-herder tensions, as the analysis of Ansaru in this study suggests. Rather, the risk stems to a large extent from the long and overlooked history of jihadi mobilization in parts of Kogi state, with those networks extending into different parts of the southwest—as well as other parts of north-central Nigeria—over the years. Another risk stems from the terrain of the long Nigeria-Benin border, which is favorable to militants given the large stretches of forest that can serve as a geographic bridge between northern and southern Nigeria (loosely defined).

Another, perhaps more surprising finding from this research is that bandits have been a partial check on jihadi expansion under certain conditions, namely in regions where bandits are more consolidated (if still quite informally) under the biggest warlords who recognize the influence they risk losing if they allow jihadis to grow too powerful. This does not preclude bandits and jihadis from cooperating for mutual gain, and it certainly is no halt on jihadi expansion as a whole. It bears repeating that, for example, the "Lakurawa" and Mahmuda groups have managed to operate across wide stretches of western Nigeria in areas affected by banditry though outside the influence of major warlords, while the authors' examination of dynamics in Kogi should make clear that jihadis have also found ways to evolve and expand that do not directly involve coopting bandits.

Nonetheless, this research reinforces how volatile relationships within the supposed 'crime-terror nexus' can exist in countries where the 'criminals' are themselves already quite powerful and/or are drawn from a different social base than jihadis. It challenges observers to avoid thinking simplistically that all threats necessarily converge or that all militants, if they draw from a Muslim social base, necessarily evolve into jihadi groups.

To recognize banditry as a pseudo-buffer against jihadis reflects the great tragedy of the current Nigerian predicament, however, as bandits have perpetrated waves of horrific violence against communities and are a highly destabilizing force in their own

cb Beyond various reports of kidnappings and bank robberies in the region since 2024 that could well be the work of Kogi jihadis, the authors' sources in Kogi noted that there have been ongoing disputes between salafis and Sufis in Kogi over control of key mosques, which are the sorts of intra-Muslim tensions that contributed to the radicalization of parts of the Ebira salafi community in the period of Mallam Baba and Mallam Mustapha.

right. The fact that some communities have welcomed jihadis as their only defense against banditry should dispel any illusions that the status quo in the northwest is somehow acceptable if it manages to prevent total jihadi consolidation. The successive mass kidnappings of students and worshippers in Kebbi, Kwara, and Niger states within days of each other in November 2025,[238] underscores just how dangerous the situation in Nigeria's western states has become. Nigerian policymakers, community leaders, and their partners face the difficult but critical task of addressing two complex and overlapping threats in banditry and jihadism, with the risk that addressing one problem in isolation might inadvertently exacerbate the other. CTC

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Feature Commentary: Red Teaming Hamas' Options

By Brian Michael Jenkins

This article examines alternate strategies that Hamas might pursue in the next stage of the Gaza peace plan. Taking a "red team" approach, it does so from the perspective of the organization's leaders, analyzing how they might assess Hamas' current situation, what imperatives drive its strategy, and how they might envision its future course of action. Three options are explored: a confrontational approach, a peaceful pathway, and a flexible and opportunistic strategy. No prediction is made as to which one Hamas may choose, and we could see combinations of measures from all three. The situation is fluid and dangerous to Hamas, and the choices are existential. Hamas leaders themselves may not know—or agree with each other on—what they will do. The purpose of the article is to inspire further red team analysis to open up our own thinking, avoid surprises, and explore creative responses.

Magnus Ranstorp's comprehensive review of Hamas, which appeared in the October 2025 issue of *CTC Sentinel,* concludes with the question, "Where does Hamas go from here?"[1] In that spirit, this essay offers a necessarily speculative inquiry into Hamas' current options. It has been more than three months since Israel and Hamas agreed to a ceasefire, release of hostages and Palestinian prisoners, and partial Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. The next steps in U.S. President Donald Trump's 20-point Gaza Peace Plan—the deployment of an International Stabilization Force (ISF), disarmament and demobilization of Hamas, and complete withdrawal of Israel Defense Forces (IDF)—are predictably more difficult. In two previous essays, I examined why these would be high hurdles[2] and offered options for how they might be carried out.[3] This article explores the same issues, but adopts a 'red team' approach to examine them from the perspective of Hamas: How might Hamas assess its current situation? What imperatives drive its strategy? What are its options?

Part One describes red teaming and how it has evolved over the years from strategic Cold War games to assessing terrorist adversaries. Part Two posits how Hamas may evaluate its own circumstances, examines the imperatives that will drive its decisions, and looks for clues in what Hamas has said and done since agreeing to the October 2025 ceasefire.

Hamas' initial actions suggest a confrontational approach, an option that is described in Part Three. Conceivably, Hamas could adopt a more peaceful posture—a *hudna* (Arabic for 'calm')—that accepts, for the foreseeable future, the necessity of suspending its armed struggle. This option is outlined in Part Four. Part Five describes a "flexible and opportunistic strategy," not as a compromise between defiance and docility, but reflecting uncertainty in a still fluid situation.

Part One: A 'Red Team' Approach

The idea of studying the enemy's intentions and capabilities is not new. In *The Art of War*, written 2,500 years ago, the Chinese strategist Sun Tzu famously observed that "if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles."[4] By *knowing* the enemy, Sun Tzu meant something broader than the enemy's order of battle. Knowing included identifying enemy strengths and weaknesses, patterns of behavior, intentions, strategy, and tactics. It also required *thinking like the enemy* to understand his values, motives, and psychology.

In recent centuries, war planners deployed red forces (representing the enemy) and blue forces (representing the friendly forces) to maneuver against each other in mock wars. These field exercises were training exercises that focused on military operations. They might lead to surprises, but they were not red teaming as we currently understand the technique.

It was not until the Cold War that ideology and motivations—*knowing* the enemy—again became critical components of red team analysis. Kremlinologists sought to understand how Russian history, and communist ideology, might affect Soviet decision-making.[5] The objective was deterring the Soviet Union from initiating a catastrophic nuclear war. Warfighting pushes red team analysis toward strategy and tactics. War prevention pushes analysts toward mindsets and motivations.

The rise of contemporary terrorism in the 1970s pushed analysts to better understand terrorist mindsets and decision-making. This was exceptionally challenging. Terrorist attacks were not preceded by potentially observable military buildups, making them hard to predict. And many of the threats made and plots discovered are aspirational. Red teams do not predict terrorist behavior, but they can alert us to surprises and help prevent "failures of imagination."

Terrorist mindsets are alien to most ordinary people. As a 2008 manual for intelligence analysts produced by the Defense Intelligence Agency notes, "Red Team analysis is aimed at freeing

Brian Michael Jenkins is a former Green Beret. In 1972, he initiated one of the nation's first research programs on terrorism. His books and monographs include International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict*;* Aviation, Terrorism and Security*;* Unconquerable Nation*;* Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?*;* The Long Shadow of 9/11*;* Paths to Destruction*; and* Plagues and Their Aftermath.

the analysts from the prison of … the analyst's own sense of rationality, cultural norms, and personal values."[6]

Extremist groups, often led by a single charismatic leader, may take actions that seem illogical by conventional standards. Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel, which would predictably provoke a massive Israeli counterattack, bringing death and destruction to thousands of Gazans, offers an example. Did Hamas merely miscalculate, or did the bloodshed serve its long-term goals by guaranteeing continuing hatred and support for the resistance? This kind of question illustrates the challenges of analyzing terrorist behavior and the dangers of overconfidence in the results.

Red Teaming in Israel

Israel has faced the same challenges. Reflecting a deeply embedded Talmudic tradition that encourages arguing different viewpoints, Israel has created mechanisms to encourage divergent analysis. Miri Eisin, the former deputy head of Israel's Combat Intelligence Corps, has observed that "as terrorism and counterterrorism experts … you have to think like the other side. That's part of how you counter it."[7]

To prevent a recurrence of the intelligence failure that left Israel caught by surprise in the 1973 October War, an Israeli commission of inquiry "recommended establishing a mechanism and nurturing a culture focused on critical thinking, thus avoiding unitary assessments and groupthink inside the IDI [Israeli Defense Intelligence]."[8] This led to the creation of a special unit in the Military Intelligence Directorate known as the *Ipcha Mistraba* (Aramaic for 'Devil's Advocate') Unit.[9]

According to Israeli sources, over time, confidence in Israel's Devil's Advocate Unit experienced a gradual erosion of confidence within the system, largely because it came to be perceived as reflexively challenging prevailing assessments, sometimes only because that is how it interpreted its duty and not because of available contrary evidence.

Still, in the weeks before Hamas' October 7 attacks, the Devil's Advocate Unit and other Israeli intelligence units attempted to highlight signs of increased Hamas assertiveness and question the assumption that Hamas was deterred by Israel's likely military response and therefore would maintain quiet in Gaza, but instead would soon launch an operation.[10] Israel, in other words, was not thinking like Hamas. These views did not gain sufficient traction at senior levels.

In both the 1973 October War and the 2023 Hamas attack, confidence in the overwhelming military superiority of the IDF led to missing the point that the adversaries' calculations would not be driven by assessments of military outcomes, but by political, psychological and, in the case of Hamas, even divine inspiration.

Understanding terrorists to improve analysis should not be confused with being *understanding* of terrorists—that is, being tolerant of their behavior. Red team analysis in no way condones the conduct of Hamas. Hamas' ultimate goal remains the destruction of Israel as a Jewish state. It exults in slaughter. It instructed its fighters on October 7 to kill, slit throats, take hostages, and document the scenes of horror—it was choreographed cruelty to create terror. Colonel Eisin was surprised by two aspects of the October 7 attacks: the breadth of the planning and the unthinkable atrocities.[11]

Slaughter and savagery, however, does not mean Hamas leaders are mere mindless killers. They have demonstrated their ability to assess and adapt to changing situations. Their worldview and mindset will determine how Hamas assesses its situation and views its options. Understanding these perspectives is essential to red teaming.

Part Two: Imagining How Hamas Might Assess its Situation

How Hamas assesses its current situation, what lessons it takes away from the recent and past conflicts, and what Hamas sees as its imperatives will shape its decisions going forward.

The Current Situation as Seen by Hamas

Although grateful for the respite, few on either side of the Israel-Palestinian conflict believe that this will be the last round of fighting. Both Hamas and Israel are preparing for renewed fighting.[12] Meanwhile, Israel is undoubtedly reviewing lessons learned during what it initially called "Operation Swords of Iron," but for symbolic and political reasons in October 2025 changed it to the "War of Redemption." Hamas commanders are likely also reviewing what they have learned from what they call "The Battle of al-Aqsa Flood," a reference to the initial attack on October 7, 2023, and Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

Hamas' chief negotiator portrayed the current ceasefire, pullback of Israeli forces, and release of Palestinian prisoners as a victory that demonstrated the organization's steadfastness and resilience.[13] Although Hamas managed to survive the massive Israeli offensive (while Gaza's population suffered terribly), it incurred unprecedented losses and its military capabilities were significantly weakened, although not eliminated entirely. As their strength declined, Hamas fighters were reduced to smaller-scale guerrilla operations but—protected by their vast tunnel system and the challenges of urban warfare—they were able to sustain a determined defense.

Estimates of Hamas' current strength vary significantly; statistics of irregular and hybrid wars are always foggy. Multiple Palestinian entities field uniformed troops in Gaza but also operate covertly. Civilian supporters augment their numbers but are difficult to count.

The estimated current strength of Hamas and allied Palestinian factions derives from three calculations: One is their strength at the outset of the war. In October 2023, the estimated number of fighters in Hamas' Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades was 25,000-40,000. Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) was believed to have 4,000 fighters.[14] Other factions may add several thousand more.[15]

The total number of fighters killed during the two years of fighting comprises the second set of numbers. These range from a low of 6,000-7,000 (Hamas' estimate[16]) to 8,500 confirmed deaths (the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data estimate[17]) to 17,000-23,000 killed, including all groups (the IDF estimate[18]).

The third figure comprises replacement. Driven by desires for revenge and the loss of livelihoods during the conflict, U.S. sources estimate that Hamas was able to recruit 10,000-15,000 fighters to replace its losses.[19] That gives us a broad range of estimates of Hamas' current strength from 10,000-20,000 to 15,000-25,000, plus fighters from other groups. Moreover, Hamas has secured funding to pay these additional troops.[20]

These numbers have relevance since they will determine how many Hamas fighters may be expected to turn in their weapons. The uncertainty provides ample room for subterfuge. Disarming 10,000 fighters, for example, would look significant, but that potentially could leave thousands of undeclared fighters and an even greater number of weapons stashed for future use.

Destroyed houses in Nuseirat camp in the central Gaza Strip are pictured on December 26, 2025. (Majdi Fathi/NurPhoto via AP Photo)

Over 900 IDF soldiers were killed in the latest conflict, including those killed during the initial assault and subsequent fighting on the border and those killed during Israel's ground offensive in Gaza.[21] Whatever estimate one uses for Hamas casualties, this is a terrible loss exchange ratio for the group, especially given that Hamas was the defending force fighting from prepared positions connected by tunnels in a heavily urbanized environment where attacking ground forces often suffer heavy casualties.

Israeli operations were conducted in a manner intended to reduce friendly casualties. Nonetheless, the war resulted in 20,000 IDF soldiers suffering physical and psychological wounds, which will impose a heavy burden on Israeli society going forward.[22] Meanwhile, Hamas fought the war in a way that protected its fighters at the expense of civilian casualties. Hamas portrays the tens of thousands of Gazan civilians killed during the war as martyrs—victims of Israeli genocide, a charge that gained some traction internationally.[23] The loss of so many lives also fuels motivation for revenge, which Hamas will exploit, although some Gazans hold Hamas responsible for bringing death and destruction to Gaza.

Hamas' Rocket Arsenal

It is not clear how Hamas might evaluate the future utility of its rockets. In an effort to overwhelm Israel's Iron Dome air defense system, Hamas and other Palestinian groups in Gaza fired 4,300 rockets on Israel during their initial assault on October 7.[24] By October 2025, the total number of rockets fired climbed to over 13,000. The Iron Dome generally knocks down over 90 percent of the rockets it fires at;[25] it does not waste its limited supply of missiles to shoot down rockets it calculates are headed for unpopulated areas.

Hamas fired thousands of rockets on October 7, overwhelming Iron Dome defenses and resulting in 12 deaths—one percent of the total fatalities during the initial ground attack—and dozens of injuries.[26] After the October 7 barrage, nine more Israelis died as a result of rockets fired from Gaza.[27] The ground assault and continuing rocket barrage forced the evacuation of surrounding towns, caused economic disruption, and took a psychological toll on Israeli society. Firing rockets also provides a means for other groups and individuals to participate in the resistance and may lift the morale of those under Israeli bombing.

Hamas will have to decide whether these returns are worth the effort, or if Hamas could afford to give up its rockets in a compromise that allows Hamas fighters to keep their basic infantry weapons. Even with a disarmament agreement, Hamas will likely try to conceal some of its rockets as a reserve; finding and accounting for all of them will be difficult. And will Gaza's other factions give up their rockets? If it gives up its rockets, will Hamas then look for unconventional ways to cripple Israel's economy or avenge the loss of lives in Gaza?

Rocket and missile fire would have made a dramatic difference had Hezbollah joined the battle, unleashing its vast arsenal of more powerful and precision-guided missiles. The damage to Israel would have been disastrous. As it turned out, Hezbollah responded

"Hamas' immediate actions are not determined solely by the threat from Israel but by the threat from Hamas' near enemies in Gaza and the long-term risk of irrelevance."

cautiously, not launching its most powerful, long-range missiles and focusing mainly on military targets and towns in northern Israel.

Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar expected a robust response by Hezbollah and the Iranian proxies in the "Axis of Resistance" (but not Iran itself). He believed that Israeli Arabs would also join the attack.[28] Captured Hamas documents show that in a letter written to Hamas leader Ismael Haniyeh in 2022,[29] Sinwar laid out three scenarios: One involved a sudden confrontation from all fronts. The second scenario involved a more limited Hezbollah barrage, using a quarter to a third of its arsenal. The third scenario put the primary burden of battle on Hamas. Haniyeh reported back that Iran and Hezbollah endorsed the first scenario—a coordinated attack.

However, other captured documents suggest that while Iran and Hezbollah both endorsed the plan, they suggested delay, but Hamas proceeded with the operation.[30] We do not know if Hamas leaders were being deliberately misled, heard what they wanted to hear, or hoped that the others would be compelled to join once the war began; anticipation of massive support turned out to be a strategic miscalculation. In the days immediately after October 7, Iranian leaders denied any involvement in the planning of the attack.[31]

Hezbollah's limited intervention did not dissuade Israel from bombing Hezbollah targets and invading Lebanon in 2024, destroying much of its military infrastructure, approximately 80 percent of its arsenal of rockets, and most of its precision-guided missiles.[32] Israel also claims to have killed more than 2,500 fighters and assassinated 25 senior Hezbollah leaders, including Hassan Nasrallah, who had led the group since 1992. To prevent Hezbollah from rearming, Israel has continued attacking Hezbollah targets and targeting its leaders in spite of the year-old ceasefire agreement.

What will Hamas take away from Hezbollah's experience? Hezbollah's decision to avoid all-out war with Israel left Hamas on its own against Israel's offensive. Going forward, Hamas must reckon that in any future conflict, it cannot depend on allies and will be largely on its own.

However, Hezbollah's experience offers another lesson. Hezbollah agreed to a ceasefire with Israel in November 2024, roughly one year before Hamas' ceasefire with Israel. Since then, Israel has continued to conduct frequent airstrikes throughout Lebanon, ground operations, and targeted killings—Hezbollah's cautious response brought little respite. Similarly, Israel has continued airstrikes, artillery fire, and targeted killings of Hezbollah and Hamas leaders since the ceasefire. Taken together, the experience of Hezbollah and of Hamas since October 10, 2025, may reinforce arguments within Hamas against compliance and cooperation as they bring nothing.

Hamas' review of its situation goes beyond the parameters of conventional military calculations of military strength. Its armed brigades have demonstrated their steadfastness. Military casualty ratios are not the only criterion. It portrays not losing as winning.

Hamas also claims successes beyond the physical battlefield. In a review of its most prominent achievements in the recent war, Hamas claims, among other things, returning the Palestinian cause to the forefront on the world's attention; transforming world opinion; causing the collapse of Israel's image and its growing isolation internationally while bringing about growing international recognition of the State of Palestine; replacing the declining Zionist narrative with a global rise in the Palestinian narrative; exposing Israeli society's deep divisions; shattering the Israeli theory of deterrence and safe haven illusion; and derailing—in its own words—the "delusional" diplomatic normalization projects.[33]

Hamas' Imperatives

Self-preservation is the group's paramount imperative. Individual members require protection; organizational survival must be ensured; the reason for the group's existence must not be lost.

Gaza remains a rough, heavily armed neighborhood, and Hamas must worry not just about Israeli attacks, but about rival armed groups, criminal gangs, and other private parties that make seek vengeance.

Self-preservation requires maintaining its authority in Gaza. The social and political mosaic in Gaza is complicated with deep fissures. The cohesion seen during the war could easily descend into factional fighting as often happens in Palestinian resistance movements, especially given the level of destruction and the despair of the population. Intra-Palestinian battles emerged during the 1936 Arab revolt and again following Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2005. This is a critical point, often missed in analysis: Hamas' immediate actions are not determined solely by the threat from Israel but by the threat from Hamas' near enemies in Gaza and the long-term risk of irrelevance.

Hamas sees itself, not the International Stabilizing Force, as the ultimate stabilizing force in post-ceasefire Gaza. As Mousa Abu Marzouk, a member of Hamas' political bureau, noted in an interview on October 25, 2025, "Some countries conditioned the rebuilding of Gaza on the exclusion of Hamas from the governing body. Do they even know what the exclusion of Hamas means? It could mean civil war. It could mean the destruction of Palestinian society. It could lead to infighting."[34]

Hamas is still the most powerful group, but its capacity has been reduced during the war. It must fend off challenges to its authority by local clans, criminal groups, and Israeli-backed militias, all of which are armed and have their own agendas. Hamas must also avoid losing leadership of the Palestinian resistance to its more extremist allies like PIJ.[a] Therefore, from its perspective, Hamas must avoid being disarmed and rendered irrelevant by enforcement

a Armed challenges to Hamas in Gaza fall into several categories: rival Palestinian resistance groups such as Fatah, PFLP, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (see Tom Bullock, "Q&A: Hamas and Fatah," NPR, June 19, 2007, and Erik Skare, *The History of Palestinian Islamic Jihad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021)); salafi-jihadi groups (see Nathalie Boehler, "How Hamas' ideology of martyrdom led to the sacrifice of an entire population," *Times of Israel*, May 21, 2024); and anti-Hamas armed clans and militias, some of which are supported by Israel (see Giorgio Cafiero, "Gaza's Armed Fragmentation: Clans, Militias, and Rival Power Centers," Stimson Center, October 27, 2025; "Hamas is battling powerful clans for control in Gaza – who are these groups and what threat do they pose?" Conversation, October 15, 2025; and Ahmad Sharawi and Joe Truzman, "Profiles of anti-Hamas militias in the Gaza Strip," FDD's Long War Journal, October 19, 2025.)

of a peace plan that bars it from any participation in the future government of Gaza.

Hamas must also maintain the cohesion and morale of its fighters to prevent disillusion, desertion, or splintering. That means demonstrating that traitors to the cause will be severely punished, hence the public executions.[35] It also means that Hamas cannot easily order its own fighters to surrender their weapons or stand down indefinitely without any clear notion about their future.

To ensure continuing sympathy and support of its own members, the Palestinian people, and the 'Arab street,' Hamas must demonstrate its continuing commitment to its Covenant—the eventual liberation of occupied Palestine and return of all of the historical land of Palestine to Palestinian control. Hamas must also maintain its international lifelines—the vital financial assistance and diplomatic help provided by its principal foreign supporters: Qatar, Turkey, and Iran.[36] And Hamas probably does not want the United States to lose interest, engagement, and ability to both constrain and put pressure on Israel.

Demonstrating its Dominance

For the time being, in the part of Gaza not occupied by the IDF, Hamas is the dominant organization in the other 41 percent of the territory. Hamas continues to pay the salaries of 30,000 government employees in Gaza.[37] It runs Gaza's police department. It regulates commerce, collects taxes, and fines merchants that violate its price controls. Hamas' direct control over the delivering of humanitarian aid has been reduced, but as the dominant armed group in the part of Gaza not occupied by Israeli forces, it maintains a grip on its distribution. Hamas is not merely an armed group in Gaza; it is a civilization.

However, Hamas maintains its political power by being the largest and most powerful armed formation in Gaza. To assert its dominance, almost immediately following the announcement of the ceasefire agreement, Hamas displayed its strength by attacking armed clans[38] that challenged its control and carrying out public executions.[39]

The disarmament of Hamas would change the balance of power between Hamas and rival groups like PIJ that field thousands of fighters and, although they collaborate with Hamas, also have their own agendas. Disarmament would also expose Hamas to attacks by the armed clans and criminal gangs that inhabit Gaza. Without their weapons, Hamas fighters would likely be targets of individual attacks. It could, as Marzouk warned, lead to civil war.

Hamas did not officially sign President Trump's 20-point peace plan, but U.S. Special Envoy Steve Witkoff says that Hamas officials told him and unofficial White House aide Jared Kushner that the group "wanted to disarm."[40] Publicly, senior Hamas and PIJ officials have categorically denied this, saying that the resistance has not been defeated and "will not disarm," that any claim that they have agreed to this is "a complete lie, and that it was not even discussed with the negotiators." "The weapons remain as long as the [Israel's] occupation [of Palestine] continues." "Disarmament is not on the agenda and is out of the question."[41]

Whether this is public posturing or reflects unshakable determination remains to be seen. Arab mediators suggest that "Hamas could agree to hand over some of its weapons, as long as President Trump can guarantee Israel will not resume fighting."[42] Hamas has also said that it is not opposed to handing over part of its arsenal, but only as part of a Palestinian political process.[43]

Hamas rejected disarmament before in 2004 when it stated that under no circumstances would it relinquish its weapons. In an internal document, however, it noted that the Palestinian organization and factions could agree on a "*treatise of honor* in this matter that will handle the problematic nature and complexity of arms usage."[44] An Egyptian official recently reported that Hamas could agree to "freeze its weapons use but not surrender them."[45]

Uncompromising public statements coinciding with hints of flexibility conveyed to intermediaries (assuming the intermediaries are not simply floating their own initiatives) suggest that Hamas' public hardline could be a negotiating position. They could also reflect differences of opinion within the organization.

Ranstorp addresses these in his recent *CTC Sentinel* article.[46] He describes a hardline faction that believes Hamas can retain exclusive control of Gaza while counting on continuing aid from Qatar, Turkey, and Iran. This is essentially Option One described in the essay. Opposing this "pragmatist bloc"—which argues that faced with a lack of funding and eroding public support, Hamas can no longer govern Gaza and must reject armed struggle and reposition itself as a political party—is essentially Option Two. According to Ranstorp, Hamas has signaled openness to various arrangements, but "the crux remains the control of guns and security."[47]

It is noteworthy that the leader of the pragmatist bloc was born in the West Bank and has never resided in Gaza while the leader of the hardline faction is a Gazan and represents the "internal" group of Gaza. Both men are contenders in the upcoming internal election to select a new leader of Hamas' politburo, which is currently governed by a council of five members.[48]

Internal divisions are not the only possible explanation for Hamas' ambivalent statements on disarming. Hamas may be signaling that any flexibility on the issue of disarming is conditional on a guarantee from President Trump that Israel will not resume fighting and as part of a Palestinian political process to eventual statehood. Is Hamas probing the willingness of the United States to take a more categorical position on constraining Israel and guaranteeing political progress for the Palestinian people?

The reality is that Hamas has no air force, no air defenses. Hamas cannot prevent Israel from bombing targets in Gaza, which it has continued to do. Nor can Hamas prevent the resumption of an all-out air and ground offensive aimed at crushing the group once and for all. Of course, this is what Israel has been trying to do since the beginning of the war, but the idea that it can wipe out Hamas remains popular. Although Hamas has survived, the renewal of potentially less-constrained hostilities would be damaging.

If it can be formed and deployed, the presence of the International Stabilization Force (ISF) called for in the peace plan will complicate renewed attacks by Israel, but by itself is not enough to deter Israel from a major military offensive any more than the presence of a U.N. force has prevented Israel from invading and occupying Lebanon.

Nor can the presence of the ISF necessarily dissuade Israel from deciding to initiate a campaign of targeted killings to eliminate Hamas leaders and commanders. In addition to killing several senior Hamas leaders in Gaza during the conflict,[49] Israel killed another senior Hamas commander in Gaza after the ceasefire.[50] Israel also killed a Hamas leader in Iran and attempted to kill a group of Hamas officials in Qatar.[51]

Only U.S. pressure can theoretically constrain Israel. While the United States wants to maintain the ceasefire and get on with the

second phase of the peace plan, officially it still regards Hamas as a terrorist organization, and it has not promised protection for its leadership or fighters.

The signals from Washington have been mixed as the United States attempts to quell violence in Gaza, prevent a breakdown of the ceasefire, establish a functioning ISF, and maintain progress in the negotiations while satisfying the conflicting demands of the belligerents. It is a difficult path that requires extraordinary skill in diplomatic dodging and weaving. The history of brokering peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians is littered with the remains of plans that initially appeared promising, but broke down owing to irreconcilable differences.

Although Washington expressed public disapproval of Israel's September attack in Qatar, and on October 13, President Trump implied that Hamas had been given U.S. approval to act as an interim peace force in Gaza "for a period of time,"[52] he subsequently warned that if Hamas does not disarm, "we will disarm them, quickly and perhaps violently."[53] And on October 16, he warned that "we will have no choice but to go in and kill them" if the bloodshed in Gaza persists.[54] These sharp turns are to be expected. We do not know what messages are being quietly relayed to Israel, and if they are being delivered consistently.

How Hamas might navigate this dangerous course is the subject of the following three parts. Hamas has three broad options. It can hold on to its weapons and defy any challenge to its authority in Gaza, accepting that this could prompt further military action against it. Instead, in accordance with the peace plan, Hamas could disarm and demobilize, reverting to its Muslim Brotherhood origins as a social movement and political organization. Or Hamas could adopt a flexible strategy that maintains its commitment to its ultimate goals while adapting to changing circumstances. These are markers on a spectrum of postures. Each option comprises a bundle of possible actions that Hamas might select and blend depending on the situation.

Part Three: A Confrontational Approach

Public statements and actions since the declaration of the ceasefire in early October suggest that Hamas seems likely to hang tough. It has denounced continuing attacks by the IDF, which Israel states are in response to Hamas' own violations of the ceasefire, but Hamas has not attempted any major retaliation in response. Its capabilities to do so are clearly limited but, as we shall see, it could look for ways to escalate the conflict laterally.

Hamas has attacked rival armed groups, including Israeli-backed militias and criminal clans, and executed suspected collaborators primarily for self-protection, as a warning to others, and to suppress internal challenges. Spilling blood also provided opportunities for performative violence to bolster the morale of its own fighters, to show that it has not surrendered, and to demonstrate that it remains in charge and will not disarm, demobilize, depart, be displaced by the ISF, or be sidelined in negotiations.

The bellicose public posturing and demonstrations of power and determination have the additional benefit of affecting the calculations of potential contributors to the ISF. Reportedly, it has caused them to seek assurances that they are not coming to Gaza to engage in combat or conduct military operations that Israel failed to complete.[55] Muslim countries contemplating sending troops to Gaza must worry about domestic reactions. Top Pakistani clerics, representing all Islamic schools of thought, have warned the government against sending troops to Gaza to disarm Hamas.[56]

These displays of defiance underscore what must already be assumed: Hamas can at any time bring about the collapse of the peace plan, although doing so would have serious consequences for Hamas as well.

Avoiding the Resumption of Full-Scale Hostilities with Israel

Neither side in the conflict has made a conciliatory gesture—nor likely believes that the current cessation of hostilities will last. A recent poll indicates that most Israelis anticipate fighting will resume in the coming year,[57] a view that many in Gaza probably share. Both Israel and Hamas face pressure from their own hardliners. Neither side, however, wants to be seen as the party responsible for a breakdown in the negotiations, which have hardly begun.

The ceasefire is precarious, with each side accusing the other of violations. Few Israelis have been killed in the attacks that have occurred since the ceasefire began. However, in response to the attacks and to preempt potential attacks, the IDF has almost continuously carried out bombing and artillery attacks as well as ground operations, reportedly killing several hundred Palestinians and destroying hundreds of structures.

These attacks may be intended to deter Hamas from new attacks while depriving it of any respite that allows recovery. But Hamas may interpret Israeli actions as efforts to provoke it into an escalating exchange that gives Israel a reason to resume full-scale hostilities. A confrontational strategy does not mean deliberately provoking a renewed war. Hamas wants to keep the heat on in Gaza, not boil the water—Israel must be portrayed as the bomb thrower.

Hamas has more to lose in the resumption of all-out war. It has had little more than three months to replace its losses, train new recruits, restore its command structure, prepare new defenses, and agree upon strategy and operational concepts. If Israel resumes full-scale military operations—possibly with tacit approval from Washington—it will be a fight to the finish in which Israel can be expected to use maximum force to destroy Hamas before domestic divisions or international pressure on Israel impose another ceasefire. And this time, there will be no living Israeli hostages to constrain Israeli operations. (As of this writing, the remains of one hostage have yet to be returned.)

Hamas knows it cannot defeat the IDF on the battlefield, and it cannot depend on support from Hezbollah, the Houthis, or Iran—an alliance that proved disappointing during the war. The current widespread anti-government protests in Iran add further uncertainty. Hamas could only try to protract the fighting and attempt to inflict heavy casualties on the attacking forces, hoping it will sap Israeli morale and mobilize domestic opposition to the war, but heavy Israeli casualties could also have exactly the opposite effect and unify Israel's population.

Given these considerations, Hamas—even while pursuing a confrontational strategy—seems likely to avoid the resumption of full-scale warfare with Israel.

Can Hamas Co-opt the ISF?

How Hamas deals with the ISF requires a different strategy. Both Israel and the United States expect the ISF to disarm Hamas. The U.N. resolution creating the ISF authorizes it "to use all necessary measures to carry its mandate … to stabilize the security environment in Gaza by ensuring the process of demilitarizing the

Gaza Strip, including the destruction and prevention of rebuilding of the military, terror, and offensive infrastructure, as well as the permanent decommissioning of weapons from non-state armed groups."[58] However, U.S. officials, speaking more recently on condition of anonymity, have said that potential contributors to the ISF have said that the ISF "would *not* fight Hamas."[59]

In numerous public statements, Hamas has made it clear that it will resist any attempt by the ISF to disarm it,[60] but Hamas may also calculate that the deployment of an international force in Gaza and beginning of reconstruction and development projects would complicate Israeli military operations. While it may not prevent Israel from conducting small-scale commando raids or precision attacks targeting Hamas commanders, Hamas may figure that Israel will want to avoid large-scale military operations that imperil foreign ISF soldiers, anger their governments, and especially anger the United States.

Hamas may therefore try to craft a creative compromise that gives up some weapons and perhaps a pledge not to carry out attacks, but that puts aside the idea of immediate outright disarmament. In return, Hamas can offer to assist the ISF in policing Gaza. This is something a local force can do better than foreign troops.

Since taking over the territory in 2007, Hamas maintained a civilian police force in Gaza separate from its military units (although some of the police may also have been Hamas fighters.) The police force numbered 9,000 before the war;[61] its numbers now are uncertain. They directed traffic, dealt with routine crime, and protected food distribution against looters, but some of the force acted as political enforcers. Targeted by Israeli forces, the police took cover during the conflict, reemerging during the ceasefires in January 2024,[62] again in early 2025,[63] and yet again after the October 2025 ceasefire.[64]

The peace plan calls for the eventual deployment of a new vetted Palestinian police force. A cooperative arrangement between Hamas and the ISF would keep the peace in the interim. Eventually, Hamas police officers could turn in their weapons, take an oath to the new authority, and become part of the new Palestinian security forces.

Theoretically, it is a compromise that offers peaceful coexistence leading to active cooperation and ultimately reintegration. In reality, it is diplomatic fudge that accepts ambiguity and risk. It moves Hamas from being treated as the defeated party to the category of participant in a process. That may be objectionable to Israel and the United States, but some sort of a tacit deal may be necessary to persuade potential contributors to join the ISF. Resolving this issue would also maintain momentum toward reconstruction and economic development that may contribute to conflict resolution, which is the genius of the peace plan.

However, the configuration of any such compromise and whether it will be accepted by all parties is not the point. The takeaway here is that Hamas can do more than kill; it can also manipulate threat perceptions in order to favorably shape diplomatic outcomes.

Escalation Cannot Be Ruled Out

Israel's intelligence services and political leadership misread the threat posed by Hamas and were caught off guard by its October 7, 2023, attack. The consensus view was that Hamas had been effectively deterred, but deterrence does not necessarily apply to terrorist groups.[65] Fanaticism increases terrorist willingness to accept extreme consequences, and in some cases, the intended effect of a terrorist attack may be to provoke overreaction.

"Terrorist strategic planning may be determined by factors other than conventional military calculations or sensitivity to the prospect of catastrophic losses that would deter most political leaders."

Sinwar's strategic miscalculations in planning the October 7 attack may in part reflect the fact that he perceived the operation as part of a divine plan,[66] a characteristic of terrorists inspired by religious beliefs. The plan depended on too many contingencies beyond Hamas' control. As it turned out, holding hostages did not constrain Israel's response. Hezbollah did not launch its vastly superior missiles in support of Hamas. Iran did not join in. And Israeli Arabs did not rise up. Were the practical uncertainties replaced by Sinwar's mystical conviction that he was acting in accord with a divine plan?

The attack resulted in a massive Israeli counteroffensive in which tens of thousands of Palestinians died. Sinwar still may have calculated that as a political plus. Hopefully, we will learn more about the planning of the attack.

The takeaway here is that terrorist strategic planning may be determined by factors other than conventional military calculations or sensitivity to the prospect of catastrophic losses that would deter most political leaders.

Still, it would seem that from Hamas' perspective, the renewal of full-scale hostilities with Israel is a risky course, while preventing disarmament may be best achieved through diplomacy. Changing circumstances, however, could alter the group's strategic calculations. What might these circumstances be?

Israel might decide to escalate—a situation in which Israel decides that, if the ISF is not going to disarm Hamas, it must do so itself. This is a factor that could renew the war. This parallels Israel's thinking regarding the ability and willingness of Lebanon's government to disarm Hezbollah. Israel's post-ceasefire actions in Lebanon are no doubt being watched in Gaza.

A campaign of targeted killings by Israel could provoke a response. On December 13, 2025, Israel killed a senior Hamas leader in Gaza.[67] This is the first known targeted killing of a high-ranking Hamas official since the latest ceasefire began. Israel claims the killing is justified given the role played by the individual in preparing the October 7 attack. However, Hamas may fear that this is only the first of a continuing campaign of assassinations like the one carried out by Israel during the Second Intifada, which killed most of Hamas' original leaders.[68]

Or Hamas might feel forced to escalate if it saw itself being eclipsed, possibly by other more radical groups determined to continue the armed struggle in Gaza. Or attacks on Israel by other groups in Gaza could provoke Israeli retaliation aimed at Hamas.

The West Bank Battle

A ceasefire in Gaza does not mean the confrontation ends everywhere else. Continued clashes in the West Bank between

October 2023 and October 2025 accounted for approximately 1,000 Palestinian fatalities and scores of Israeli deaths.[69] The simmering conflict could escalate further at any time into an armed conflict in which inaction by Hamas could be seen as an abandonment of the resistance.

Palestinians in the West Bank, as do a vast majority of Palestinians generally, view the Palestinian Authority as ineffectual and corrupt,[70] and have mostly applauded Hamas' militancy. Its attack on October 7 and the subsequent war saw significant gains in its public support.[71] Hamas consistently polls ahead of its rival Fatah. The West Bank is a critical political battleground for Hamas. Despite its popularity, many Palestinians view the West Bank as the main arena of the conflict—the future Palestinian state. What happens in Gaza itself is a sideshow.

Hamas does not have the same military capability in the West Bank that it has in Gaza, but the growing volume of violence has facilitated Hamas recruiting, and it does have clandestine cells, some of which have recently been active. It is particularly strong in Jenin and Nablus where much of the recent violence and most of the clashes between the IDF and Palestinians have occurred. Hebron is another traditional Hamas stronghold.

Escalating assaults on Palestinians and continued expansion of Israeli settlements are putting pressure on all Palestinian groups to respond. Palestinian rivalries will draw Hamas into the battle. It wants to demolish Fatah. It also fears that inaction could be seen as betrayal of its Covenant, even complicity. And if Hamas leaders do not react, Hamas fighters in the West Bank could take action themselves or join other groups more inclined to violence.

This is the fundamental difference between national armies and more difficult to control groups like Hamas where fervent fighters may initiate hostilities on their own initiative, and their allegiance is not limited to one group. All leaders of military formations seek to impose discipline, but Hamas' calculations are complicated.

There is at present no serious rival contender to Hamas in Gaza, however, that is because Hamas has remained combative and committed to its stated objectives. Abandoning those objectives and inaction by Hamas, however, could change the dynamics of the situation. Hamas could be weakened by desertions as its own fighters drift away or join more militant organizations. It also can sour public attitudes toward Hamas. This is precisely the argument made by Hamas leader Khalil Al-Hayya who has warned that public sentiment in Gaza against Hamas is increasing as it becomes clear that the movement's pledge to liberate Palestine and expel the Israelis has devolved into a bid for a seat at the post-war Gaza negotiating table.[72]

To maintain command and prevent organizational splintering, Hamas must maintain the loyalty and compliance of its fighters and its vanguard position in the resistance. To prevent being outflanked by rival groups and face retaliation for their actions, Hamas must be prepared to punish its own allies. In Gaza, guns are the currency of discourse. Leadership, legitimacy, loyalty, influence, security, and survival are maintained by the ruthless use of force.

If put under extreme pressure, Hamas has some capability to carry out terrorist attacks in Israel. Hamas could instigate a new intifada. Or Hamas could maintain tranquility while it prepares another devastating attack. With the IDF occupying half of Gaza, this is not likely to take the form of a cross-border assault, but could take the form of something like the 2008 Mumbai attack, in which a team of attackers infiltrated the city and split up to carry out coordinated attacks.

International attacks on Israeli or Jewish targets, something Hamas has not generally done, are also possible. European authorities have uncovered Hamas involvement in a number of recent terrorist plots. In his article in the October 2025 issue of *CTC Sentinel* on whether Hamas will pursue external operations, Matthew Levitt makes a convincing case that under the direction of its central leadership, the organization has been expanding its capabilities for international terrorism for a number of years. Although a departure from its previous *modus operandi*, it is certainly a strategic option. But Levitt also notes that Hamas may rein in its external operations "so as not to undermine the ceasefire and give Israel reason to resume its war against Hamas."[73] A terrorist campaign against Israeli targets abroad would entail risks for Hamas. In addition to provoking renewed war with Israel, terrorist attacks could unify Israelis. They could also undermine global pro-Palestinian sympathies and replace foreign efforts to constrain Israelis with security-driven crackdowns.

However, if Israel launches an all-out attack on Hamas in Gaza, then all options are on the table, including terrorist attacks in Israel and abroad. Hamas denied involvement in the German plot, not surprisingly. There is, however, the possibility that actors abroad, unconnected with Hamas but inspired by events in Gaza, could carry out attacks on their own initiative to demonstrate their solidarity with Hamas or seek support from Iran or others. Levitt points out that Hamas-inspired factions, rogue actors, or independent cells could work with allies like Iran to carry out attacks.[74] Operating under a different banner would allow Hamas leaders to maintain plausible deniability. The emergence of a hardline faction in Hamas that carries out international terrorist attacks under a new name, but with tacit support of Hamas leaders would parallel the emergence of Black September from Fatah in the 1970s. Although operating under the new banner, the PLO planned and supported its operations.[75] There are ample precedents in the Middle East for all of these permutations.

If Hamas concludes that the only purpose of the peace plan is to eradicate the group as a means of reducing pressure on Israel to acquiesce to eventual Palestinian statehood, then compliance is extinction. Hamas does not intend to disappear. The alternative is escalation that could immediately collapse the peace plan or a protracted campaign of subversion and clandestine armed resistance.

Finally, escalation may result from miscalculation. Precisely calibrating violence is difficult. It is hard to predict whether the opponent will correctly perceive intended constraint—or whether that even matters. Both Israel and Hamas face pressure from their own hardliners who may be looking for excuses to escalate. Hamas miscalculated on October 7; it can do so again.

Part Four: Returning to its Origins

Hamas is determined to remain a central part of Palestinian political life. The peace plan says, no way: "Hamas and other factions agree to not have any role in the governance of Gaza, directly, indirectly, or in any form."[76] That would seem to make voluntary disarmament and demobilization an unlikely course of action. It would require a dramatic turnabout in Hamas' strategy. However unlikely, it cannot be entirely dismissed. We have witnessed dramatic turnabouts before.

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1977 astounded the world

when he told the Egyptian parliament, "I am ready to go to the ends of the earth, and even to their home, to the Knesset itself, to argue with them [the Israelis], in order to prevent one Egyptian soldier from being wounded."[77] Recall Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's famous remark on the lawn of the White House when signing the first Oslo Accords in 1993: "Enough of blood and tears."[78] Cynics, of course, will point out that both men were assassinated by fanatics in their own camp.

These historical examples, of course, differ from Hamas' current circumstances, but Hamas has shown itself at times capable of pragmatism. The former head of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, repeatedly proposed a 10-year ceasefire with Israel—with 10-year extensions if necessary. It was a conditional offer, which many dismissed as a propaganda ploy, and Yassin was assassinated soon after, but it still gives cover for Hamas to alter its course and accept new realities.

Some Hamas leaders reportedly "favor political accommodation over open-ended confrontation."[79] In a clear step toward acceptance of the peace plan, on January 11, 2026, Hamas announced that its Gaza agencies will "hand over all authorities in Gaza to the independent Palestinian technocratic government," that will control Gaza under the supervision of the Board of Peace called for in the peace plan.[80]

Announcing that it is ready to cede its political control of Gaza does not mean that Hamas is ready to give up its weapons, but imagine for a moment that someone with authority in Gaza like Hamas' current military commander, Izz al-Din Haddad—a hypothetical choice, not an endorsement—were to announce that after decades of fighting, it was time to put the guns down. *'Tens of thousands of Palestinians—soldiers and civilians—have lost their lives in a succession of bitter wars. We have achieved international recognition of the Palestinians' just cause and, owing to President Trump's personal intervention, Israel has been constrained and there is now 'a credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood,' which is now endorsed by a majority of the European Union states and the United Nations. Hamas will now take that path.'*

In accordance with the peace plan, Hamas in return would expect Israel to further withdraw its forces from Gaza. Hamas could welcome the deployment of the ISF, announcing that it looks forward to working with it to maintain peace in Gaza. Hamas leaders could argue that the peace would allow rapid reconstruction from which all Gazans would materially benefit. The men who defended the people of Gaza would now help rebuild it.

Embracing a peaceful pathway would require a radical change in Hamas' thinking. Hamas would have to counter any perception that suspending the armed struggle was a betrayal of religious faith. Nor was it an abandonment of the struggle, which is why it would be better if the announcement came from a frontline commander like Haddad who had devoted his life to the armed struggle, which had also cost him the life of his son and almost cost his own life on several occasions. It would have to be presented as a continuation of the struggle by other means to achieve what the United States itself now recognized as "the aspiration of the Palestinian people."

A man like Haddad could say this with credibility. He joined Hamas as a teenager in 1987, the year it was created. He has been imprisoned by Israel several times. He had a price on his head and was reportedly the target of six Israeli assassination attempts. Israelis referred to him as "the ghost." While commanders who have fought on the frontlines have a greater voice among militants, it does not mean there would be no opposition to him from determined diehards in Hamas or that all would promptly comply. Internal warfare might well follow. Ending wars can be bloody.

To take advantage of the new circumstances, Hamas could create a broader political movement, possibly named something other than Hamas, but reflecting its Islamic principles and continuing commitment to Palestinian statehood while enabling Hamas' veterans to participate with the recognition that the new movement will argue they deserve as heroes of the longest and—for Palestinians—bloodiest war fought against Israel.

A Hamas Role in Policing and Politics

In return for facilitating the advance of the peace plan, Hamas would continue to argue for a post-war role in policing and politics. Hamas and most Palestinians have long been suspicious of the Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF), created after the 1993 Oslo Accords, which it views not only as an instrument of its rival Fatah, but also as collaborators with Israel in the West Bank. The European Union currently trains the Palestinian Civil Police Force in the West Bank, a separate component of the PASF, but leaves the other missions of the American-backed PASF. The European Union has expressed its willingness to train a civil police force for Gaza.[81] Hamas currently runs the police force in Gaza.

In return for suspending its armed struggle, Hamas could demand that its new political entity participate in reforming the Palestinian Authority from within—as called for in the peace plan. It could point out that political recognition and participation differ little from the settlements that ended the conflicts in El Salvador, South Africa, and Northern Ireland. Hamas could also renew its call for the release of imprisoned Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti—not an endorsement, but not a hypothetical choice—to enable him to participate in (and possibly lead) a unified Palestinian government.

Acceding to the peace plan would require Hamas to reverse that trajectory and revert to a social and political movement. The Muslim Brotherhood, from which Hamas emerged, began as an Islamist revivalist movement aiming to create an Islamic society through social, political, and religious activism. In the mid-1940s, the Brotherhood established a branch in Palestine where it focused on building mosques and schools, improving health care, and providing other social services.

In the turbulent years that followed, Hamas increasingly incorporated a more Palestinian nationalist outlook and adopted a more activist strategy. In 1987, it rebranded itself as a resistance movement and participated in the violence of the First Intifada. In the 1990s, it became a rival of the PLO and the principal opponent of the peace process. This ultimately led to the emergence of Hamas as the most violent group of the Second (Al-Aqsa) Intifada, followed by its takeover of Gaza in 2007 and multiple wars with Israel.

Many skeptics outside of Hamas, of course, would dismiss Hamas' change of heart as an example of *taqiyah*, the Muslim concept that permits dissimulation when it serves a purpose. Hamas could respond that *taqiyah* applies to concealing Islamic faith, which Hamas is not doing.

Nor does a change of strategy require a change of heart as Hamas members would be embracing, not abandoning the path to eventual Palestinian statehood, which the peace plan itself promises. This option essentially takes the movement back to its Hamas Muslim Brotherhood origins as a faith-based social welfare and political

movement as it existed before Sheikh Yassin transformed it into what Ranstorp called a "war machine."[82]

The Muslim Brotherhood has a long and complex history, which we tend to see almost exclusively through its recent armed struggle with Israel. Its emergence reflects issues that have engaged Muslim thinkers for the past 150 years, and it has evolved as an Islamic resistance movement since its founding in the 1920s.[83] In Israel, its trajectory has taken it to the attack on October 7, 2023, but that does not mean that survival cannot dictate new directions. Indeed, an internal debate seems to be occurring now.

Part Five: A Flexible and Opportunistic Strategy

There is a third way. It is not merely a compromise between confrontation and compliance, but rather it is a strategy driven by uncertainty as to what might happen next and disunity among Hamas' leadership. Growing political turbulence in Israel, escalating violence in the West Bank that could lead to a renewed intifada, an Israeli invasion of Lebanon to prevent Hezbollah from rearming, and/or U.S. abandonment of its peace plan or its renunciation of an eventual Palestinian state are all possibilities.

The strategy is therefore flexible and opportunistic. Hamas can again thank President Trump for his personal intervention in arranging the ceasefire and embrace the ambitious economic development plan, which will benefit the people of Gaza who have been deprived of work and income for so many years and suffered so grievously during the repeated wars in Gaza, especially the most recent one.

Hamas can restate its position that it looks forward to a defined (including time delineated) path to statehood as part of an eventual two-state solution (although it is not certain that Hamas would accept that as a final outcome). In the meantime, it pledges not to attack neighboring Israeli communities, not to launch rockets or missiles, and to work with the ISF to prevent rocket attacks by other factions. In return, Hamas will rely on the United States and the yet-to-be-formed International Board, envisioned in the peace plan, to persuade Israel to withdraw from the remainder of Gaza and prevent any Israeli settlements in Gaza.

This approach offers backers of the peace plan compliance, but without a capitulation that would enfeeble Hamas. It is unyielding on core survival issues, but it accepts the utility of a long-term ceasefire and will avoid provoking the resumption of full-scale Israeli operations. It therefore will avoid reacting to minor Israeli provocations, relying instead on international, and specifically American, pressure on Israel to prevent escalation.

Seeking a Cooperative Relationship with the ISF

Cooperation will require some concessions. Hamas does not want to see Gaza descend into the kind of chaos seen in Iraq in 2003 or Syria in 2011. Therefore, there is a pathway where Hamas can decide to welcome the deployment of the ISF, pointing out that its presence, not just in the Israeli-occupied portion of Gaza, but eventually throughout the territory will protect the people of Gaza (primarily because it complicates aggressive actions by the Israelis).

As discussed previously, to encourage its deployment, Hamas can quietly communicate to prospective contributors to the force in advance that it does not intend to challenge their presence and, in fact, can assist them by operating as a parallel force. This arrangement does not require formal recognition, but merely a tacit *modus vivendi*. The two forces will coexist and avoid confrontation. (There will be elements on both sides that will want to spoil this.) An informal joint communications mechanism can be established to ensure deconfliction and coordination when needed. The ISF will thus be able to fulfill its mission as a stabilizing force while Hamas rules the streets and back alleys.

Aware that the ISF will be reluctant to be seen shooting Palestinians or be perceived as Israel's proxies, Hamas will further assist the ISF in implementing the peace plan by turning over its rockets and some of its other heavier weapons, but its fighters would retain their personal weapons, which Hamas can argue are necessary for protection and to deal with groups that prey upon the population or might seek to overturn the ceasefire. Hamas can pledge that except for the firepower necessary to deal with heavily armed gangs, the bulk of Hamas' weapons could be placed in locations possibly under some kind of joint ISF-Hamas custody.

Hamas could also demand that its current police officers as well as fighters who turn over their weapons and pledge themselves to peaceful co-existence are not just amnestied as the plan promises, but that they are allowed to participate in the expanded Gaza police force so that these individuals can receive police training provided by the European Union or in one of the Arab countries that may offer such training.

IDF operations degraded Hamas' military capabilities, preventing it from conducting any more large-scale attacks like that on October 7 and forcing it to operate exclusively as urban guerrillas. Rearming for large-scale operations at this time makes little military sense; parades to show off uniformed fighters are currently counterproductive. Instead, Hamas could use the time to review its performance and formulate a new doctrine of defensive and offensive urban guerrilla warfare.

Attacking well-dug-in defenders in urban environments is costly in terms of casualties. Israel relied heavily on airpower and kept Israeli casualties down below the high rates of ground casualties suffered by the Syrian Democratic Forces in taking cities held by the Islamic State. The IDF did not suffer heavy casualties in any single battle equivalent to those suffered by U.S. forces, for example, in the Second Battle of Fallujah in Iraq or the 1968 Battle of Hue in Vietnam. The costliest battle of the war to the IDF was Hamas' initial attack on October 7. As Gaza reconstructs and builds new infrastructure and commercial facilities under international supervision, including hotels to promote economic development, Israel's use of air power will be constrained. Hamas theoretically could rely less on heavier weapons and more on small-scale operations assisted by drones. This would require discreet retraining, rather than ostentatious displays of masked marching fighters, which may be popular with many Gazans as symbols of armed resistance, but only attract negative attention, and certainly would diminish the attractiveness of Gaza for investment or high-end tourism.

Hamas can use its popularity as the avatar of Palestinian resistance to build a broad political movement, both domestically and internationally. Historically, Hamas has always been more multidimensional than a purely military movement. It has political skills, has run the government of Gaza since 2007, and delivered social services. It is difficult to determine how well it has performed these tasks. It has ruled with an iron hand, and there are no reliable public opinion polls or elections to gauge performance. Hamas fighters are often cheered in public and there are choreographed displays of support, but there are also reports of complaints.

Conclusion

Looking at the situation from Hamas' point of view gives us insight into how many variables it must include in its decision-making. These are just as complex but certainly differ from decision-making in open democracies. No one knows what Hamas will do next. Its leaders themselves, inside and outside Gaza, may be uncertain. Internal divisions have been reported in the past, and there are differing views today.

That suggests uncertainty about Hamas' future trajectory. Pragmatists led by Khaled Mashal argue for political accommodation while hardliners led by Khalil al-Hayya demand continued confrontation. The two men are the major contenders to lead Hamas' politburo in forthcoming internal Hamas elections.[84] As of January 2026, al-Hayya was seen as the front-runner,[85] but he is close to the Iranians[86] and therefore could be affected by Iran's current political unrest, which could also reduce Hamas' ability to pay its fighters. On January 12, 2026, it was reported that the election had been postponed, possibly because of internal disagreements within Hamas.[87]

The cessation of hostilities does not mean an end to hostility. There is no commitment to peace. Reconciliation is a far-off planet. Hamas is primarily concerned with survival.

This has been a multi-front war for Israel. Going forward, the same is true for Hamas, which faces a complex array of threats. Israel is its most dangerous, but not its only adversary. Gaza remains a rough, heavily armed neighborhood where Hamas must deal with near enemies, including rival armed groups, criminal gangs, and private parties seeking vengeance.

Beyond Gaza, Hamas is determined to crush its principal rival for leadership of all Palestinians—Fatah. The venue for that contest is the West Bank.

Hamas sees the peace plan as filled with risks but potentially offering opportunities. The current uncertainty requires flexibility. Hamas will keep its options open until a more complete picture emerges.

Since its creation, Hamas has transformed from a religious, social, and political movement into a violent resistance front to a proto-state with a large, well-armed paramilitary force. It has gone through two intifadas and multiple wars with Israel. During that time, it has evolved organizationally, adapted to new conditions, and adjusted its strategy. That process continues.

Its transition from terrorist cells to its Al-Qassam Brigades enabled Hamas to escalate its violence and shift its strategy toward more ambitious military operations like that on October 7. However, the primary objectives of that attack remained in the conceptual realm of terrorism. Hamas did not expect to overrun Israel militarily. Written instructions to the attackers confirm that the attack was intended to exploit what Hamas perceived as weaknesses in Israel's fractured political body, to shock and demoralize its foe, to create fear and alarm, and, by taking Israel down psychologically, inspire Hamas' allies to join in the kill. It was a classic terrorist operation. This manner of thinking will continue to strongly influence future Hamas strategy and tactics.

It should be pointed out, however, that Sinwar possibly had ambitions greater than a terrorist attack aimed primarily at achieving psychological effects. Some intelligence suggests that Hamas' plans aimed at actually seizing and defending positions in southern Israel, which might have been more feasible if Hezbollah simultaneously launched complementary operations in the north.[88]

"Three existential issues will dominate whatever strategic course Hamas may take. Hamas will not be fully disarmed. Hamas will not be excluded from playing a significant role in the future of Gaza and the broader Palestinian movement. Hamas will not give up its commitment to eventual Palestinian statehood. Whether its strength declines with a two-state solution or persists until all territory of historical Palestine is held depends on at present unknowable factors."

The music festival, where so much carnage occurred, possibly disrupted this operational concept, by diverting a number of attackers toward pursuing civilians attending the festival rather than advancing farther inland. The stubborn defense put up by Israeli civilians as well as by personnel from the IDF, Shin Bet, and police further contributed to delaying, disrupting, and limiting the scope of the attacks.

Internal documents from past pivot points tell us that Hamas thinks strategically. It identifies its long-term objectives, its basic principles, its red lines, and its strategic options. Hamas examines all scenarios. Amid the continuous hostilities, miscalculations can have dire consequences.

In the current situation, Hamas must now also take into account an unprecedented array of external actors, each with its own direct interests in the outcome. It is apparent from its own review of the recent conflict and previous documents cited in this article that Hamas follows Israeli political developments, appreciates the domestic political pressures that govern Israel's actions, and pays close attention to U.S. relations with Israel.

Three existential issues will dominate whatever strategic course Hamas may take. Hamas will not be fully disarmed. Hamas will not be excluded from playing a significant role in the future of Gaza and the broader Palestinian movement. Hamas will not give up its commitment to eventual Palestinian statehood. Whether its strength declines with a two-state solution or persists until all territory of historical Palestine is held depends on at present unknowable factors.

Hamas does not view itself as a vanquished party.[89] Hamas knows that it can be decimated militarily, but it does not intend to disappear. A return to all-out war poses serious risks, which Hamas will likely want to avoid. However, the resumption of full-scale hostilities will also destroy the peace plan, which gives Hamas leverage. If it is not part of the game, it can knock over the table. In short, Hamas can make—or break—the peace plan.

Hamas' network of alliances proved to be a mirage. Hezbollah, Iran, and its proxies failed to provide more than minimal assistance and cannot be relied upon in future strategic calculations. Hamas, however, still wants Iranian financial support and may seek

advanced weaponry, although smuggling missiles into Gaza should be more difficult than Iran's deliveries to Hezbollah.

Hamas probably sees gains in world opinion—greater sympathy for the Palestinian cause, increased opposition to Israel—as diplomatic capital it does not want to squander. It wants to keep Gaza and the Palestinian cause in the headlines in a favorable light.

Under current circumstances, terrorist attacks in Israel bring substantial risk and may backfire. International terrorism has utility as a threat, but attacks could be counterproductive. However, neither can be ruled out.

Growing violence in the West Bank creates recruiting opportunities for Hamas and could lead to a new front in which Hamas is already an active participant.

Hamas will not likely be disarmed without a fight but, in return for political concessions, it may be persuaded to give up its rockets, which have little strategic utility, and possibly some of its other heavy weapons. Hamas may be receptive to a creative solution that allows some of its fighters to lay down—not turn over—the basic weapons of its fighters in return for credible guarantees, but that will require difficult negotiations and possibly some compromise.

Hamas is aware that the ISF must be comprised primarily of troops from Muslim countries and that their governments do not want to be engulfed in hostilities and cannot be seen as Israel's proxies in disarming. Therefore, these governments may welcome compromise solutions.

Hamas is capable of multi-dimensional warfare; it can manipulate threat perceptions in order to favorably shape diplomatic outcomes. As an example, Hamas' belligerent refusal to disarm is in part a psychological operations campaign calculated to discourage potential participants in the ISF to deploy to Gaza without an acceptable compromise, tacit or announced, that is agreed to in advance.

Looking at Hamas from its own perspective provides insights into what its leaders worry about, not what its fighters feel or the attitudes of Gazans toward Hamas. Determined not to disappear, to demonstrate its readiness to resist disarmament, and to ensure its control of Gaza, belligerence is necessary for survival. Hamas faces an array of military, political, and diplomatic challenges. Its leaders debate what course of action to take to hold onto its constituency. A peaceful path is an option—but peace is not the objective. CTC

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A New 'Regicides' Era? Analyzing Trends in Terrorism Threats Against European Elected Officials

By Thomas Renard

Some recent terrorist activities in Europe, including a foiled plot against Belgium's prime minister, have purposefully aimed at elected officials. This is not a new phenomenon, as there is a long tradition of political assassinations among terrorist groups. However, there are some indications that this may be the start of a new era of political violence against state representatives. This study analyzes data on terrorist attacks against European elected officials over the past decade. It concludes that there is a persistent threat, dominated by far-right violent extremism. While the data does not allow one to conclude that the threat is growing in Europe, the study highlights some significant trends that could result in higher threat levels against government officials.

On October 9, 2025, three young individuals were arrested near Antwerp, Belgium, for allegedly planning a terrorist attack inspired by jihadi ideology. Their plot looked ambitious, involving improvised explosives carried by a commercial drone. It also contrasted drastically with most low-scale contemporary terrorist attacks perpetrated by lone actors. Most importantly, the small cell was allegedly targeting the Belgian prime minister, Bart De Wever, and possibly other political figures.[1]

Several politicians have been the target of terrorism in recent years. Prominent examples include the assassination and attempted murder of state representatives in Minnesota in June 2024 by a Christian abortion opponent.[2] In May 2024, a man shot and critically injured Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico and was convicted for terrorism in October 2025.[3] In October 2021, Member of the U.K. Parliament David Amess was stabbed to death, by a self-identified member of the Islamic State who was subsequently convicted in relation to terrorism.[4] In June 2019, German regional governor Walter Lübcke was shot dead by a far-right extremist opposing pro-immigration policy. The perpetrator was convicted to a life sentence, although not on the basis of terrorism charges.[5] In November 2017, a man associated with the Islamic State had plotted to kill U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May. He was arrested in a successful police operation and convicted to life in prison for terrorism.[6]

These are just some recent—and highly mediatized—cases of violent attacks on elected officials, qualified as terrorism or violent extremism. This article explores whether this is a new wave of terrorist threats against political leaders, reminiscent of previous eras of political assassinations, by looking at the frequency of such plots. It reflects more broadly on the context and causes behind attacks against elected officials.

Some recent research has investigated politically motivated violent attacks against elected and other government officials in the United States, clearly showing a growing occurrence of such incidents.[7] This article explores whether a similar trend is observed in other regions, namely Europe, and whether this phenomenon can be attributed to terrorism and violent extremism.

The article starts by placing terrorist attacks against political figures in a broader historical perspective. It then presents and analyzes a new dataset of terrorist attacks against elected officials in Europe (2015-2025). The article concludes with a discussion of whether the current security and political contexts could result in a growing trend of attacks against elected officials.

Historical Precedents in Europe

Terrorism directed at state representatives is not new. Terrorist groups have long considered it legitimate to assassinate heads of state and other prominent political figures to advance their agenda. After all, the term *terrorism* originates from the so-called "Reign of Terror," the brief period that followed the French Revolution in the late 18th century marked by brutal political violence, resulting notably in the beheading of King Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette, and several other prominent figures.[8]

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, anarchists heralded a never-equaled period of regicides, killing the Russian Tsar Alexander II (1881), French President Sadi Carnot (1894), Spanish Prime Minister Canovas del Castillo (1897), Austrian Empress Elisabeth (1898), King Umberto I of Italy (1900), and U.S. President William McKinley (1901). The same period also witnessed several near misses on other heads of state, including Belgian King Leopold II.[9]

The assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary in Sarajevo (1914) is yet another prominent example. The assassin was a member of a nationalist organization from Serbia, 'the Black Hand,' which can be described as a terrorist group. This act famously precipitated World War I.

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The second half of the 20th century saw several other prominent illustrations of terrorist groups targeting political leaders. In 1961 and 1962, two assassination attempts narrowly missed French President Charles De Gaulle. The perpetrators of those attempts were members of the far-right terror group *Organisation Armée Secrète* (OAS), which resisted the French withdrawal from Algeria through terror campaigns.[10]

On the other side of the political spectrum, the far-left Italian terrorist group Red Brigades kidnapped former Prime Minister Aldo Moro in 1978, asking for the release of some prisoners in exchange. After 55 days of captivity, Moro was executed.[11]

Ethno-separatist organizations were not left out. In 1973, the Basque separatist terror organization ETA killed Spanish Prime Minister Luis Carrero Blanco in a spectacular bombing.[12] In 1984, the Irish separatist organization IRA nearly succeeded in killing British Prime Minister Thatcher, in an even more daring hotel bombing in Brighton, which resulted in five deaths, including a conservative MP, and dozens of injured.[13]

Several prominent examples outside Europe could also be mentioned. This includes notably the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981 by the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and of India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984, killed by Sikh extremists.

This short and non-exhaustive list of prominent attacks demonstrates a long tradition of terrorist groups resorting to political assassinations. As argued by one scholar, over time a growing number of terrorist groups have come to "see assassination as a legitimate and effective tool."[14]

In this regard, one can confidently assert that plots like the one foiled in Belgium are not a new phenomenon. It is, in fact, a recurring terrorist tactic, across time and ideologies. But is it on the rise? The next section leverages a dataset to address this question as it pertains to Europe.

Data Collection

There is no harmonized dataset on politically motivated attacks against elected officials in Europe. Although some countries collect and publish relevant data (see below), this is more the exception than the rule. Furthermore, similarly to the U.S. studies mentioned above, the data rarely distinguishes between terrorism, violent extremism, and more broadly politically motivated incidents. As a result, existing data is insufficient to paint a clear picture across Europe. It also prevents a more nuanced analysis of the phenomenon focused on terrorism and violent extremism, as opposed to all types of violent crimes, against elected officials.

To address this issue, the author collected data on incidents covering the past decade (2015-2025)—a sufficiently long period to observe significant trends.[a] The geographical focus of this data collection effort was exclusively limited to European countries, including E.U. countries, as well as the United Kingdom and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland).[b] This selection offers some reasonable geographical and political consistency, as these countries are all liberal democracies (although some countries arguably less than others) in a situation of peace.[c]

The dataset focuses on terrorism and the broader concept of 'violent extremism.' The question of what constitutes a terrorist attack is a recurring element of discussion around any dataset in this field.[15] One restrictive solution is to adhere to prosecutorial decisions (i.e., to collect only cases that resulted in a conviction for terrorism offenses). However, this is largely unsatisfactory for several reasons. First, even within a coherent geographical area, terrorism laws and their concrete implementation can vary greatly, hence possibly introducing a significant bias. Indeed, some countries have a significantly higher threshold for prosecuting terrorist offenses, compared to others. Second, some ideologies, namely jihadi, are more likely to result in terrorist convictions than others, due to the explicit recognition of the terrorist nature of groups such as al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. Third, a number of attacks or plots are never prosecuted either because the perpetrator died in the attack or the perpetrator(s) managed to escape justice.

To build the dataset, therefore, the author relied on the broader scholarly understanding of terrorism, based on several decades of research. The dataset includes attacks that were clearly motivated by a violent ideology, as evidenced either by the perpetrator's profile (e.g., member of a terrorist organization) or discourse (e.g., promoting violent extremist views). Cases that did not hew closely to the general understanding of terrorism and violent extremism, and did not meet these criteria, were excluded.[16] [d]

Although legal thresholds are not a panacea, they do constitute an interesting criteria nonetheless. In spite of the caveats mentioned above, cases leading to terrorism convictions can be considered—under certain circumstances—as more serious than those that do not and are therefore worth particular attention. As a result, the data distinguishes between 'terrorism cases,' resulting in convictions for terrorism offenses, and 'violent extremism cases,' when individuals were either not arrested or not convicted for terrorism (although sometimes they had been charged with terrorism, but the charges were eventually dropped). Finally, some cases were categorized as 'unclear,' when information was lacking on the incident and its perpetrator(s), but there was still sufficient information (related to the context, for example) to justify considering the incident as likely motivated by terrorism or violent extremism. To be clear, the distinction between "terrorism" and "violent extremism" in this case is more legalistic than conceptual, as all cases included in

a The data collection ended on October 15, 2025.

b The list of countries covered in the dataset therefore includes: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Republic of Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

c The author explicitly excluded Ukraine, where several notable incidents occurred, because they occurred in the context of war, which is significantly different from the rest of Europe.

d Although definitions vary, both terrorism and violent extremism share some important commonalities, namely the support or use of violence to achieve political or ideological objectives. See, for instance, Alex P. Schmid, *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2013).

the dataset are considered by this author as a form of terrorism in the sense of the scholarly literature. In cases where the author had doubt, the incident was excluded from the dataset.

The threshold for inclusion is much higher compared to some previous research that included more broadly defined threats and harassment against politicians. Online harassment and threats are a highly problematic issue and can undermine democracy, however, such a low threshold across this study's geographical area would have likely resulted in thousands of results, representing very different types of events and motivations. A systematic data collection would have been further complicated since most of these types of threats are not reported to the police, and even less so prosecuted.[17] Overall, the narrow focus on terrorism and violent extremism creates more data coherence and is more insightful for the field of terrorism studies.

The dataset includes completed and failed attacks as well as foiled plots. This is in line with the observation by other scholars that terrorism *plots* should be included when possible to provide a more complete measure of terrorist activity and trends.[18] However, the inclusion of plots challenges any claim to the comprehensiveness of the dataset. Indeed, while a number of terror plots leak to the press, presumably even more so when involving prominent political figures, it is also fair to assume that many more plots remain unknown. Foiled plots are much less visible, particularly if they were low profile or disrupted at an early stage. As a result, a number of these plots do not get much media coverage, if at all, particularly if they did not lead to public charges and prosecution. Aside from two exceptions, the dataset includes only foiled plots that resulted in the prosecution of the perpetrator(s), and hence resulted in some media coverage.

With regard to the targets, the dataset includes plots and attacks against all elected officials and political representatives—whether at the local, national or international levels—in the European countries outlined above. This includes local council officials or mayors, members of parliament or governments, as well as members of the European Parliament. Compared to other studies that focus on a broader category of 'public officials' (including, for example, education, health workers, or law enforcement), which more broadly represent the government,[19] this study aligns more closely with the work of other scholars who have focused on a narrower and more coherent corpus of state representatives: elected officials.[20]

Finally, several sources were leveraged to build the dataset. This included searches through major databases and annual reports on terrorism such as the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), the Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence (RTV) Dataset, and Europol's annual Terrorism Situation and Trends Report (TE-SAT) reports on terrorism trends in Europe. It also included searches through academic articles covering this topic and queries that used a combination of key words run through Google and LexisNexis.[e] Some snowball research was also implemented, as some articles were referring to other cases that were subsequently researched.[f]

Results

The dataset contains 36 ideologically motivated attacks or plots against European elected officials from 2015-2025. This includes 19 completed attacks and 17 foiled plots. Specifically, the dataset includes 15 terrorist incidents,[g] 17 violent extremist incidents, and four unclear cases. As explained above, the "violent extremist" incidents and the "unclear cases" would fit most scholarly definitions of terrorism, but did not result in a conviction for a terrorist offense and were therefore coded separately for transparency.

As a preliminary remark, it is important to note that while the dataset provides valuable insights, the small number of cases in the dataset (N=36) prevents drawing definitive conclusions, and the findings should therefore be interpreted with caution. Despite efforts to ensure comprehensiveness, it is likely that additional relevant cases were not captured, which could meaningfully alter the observed patterns. The results should thus be seen as indicative rather than conclusive, highlighting preliminary findings and potential areas for further research.

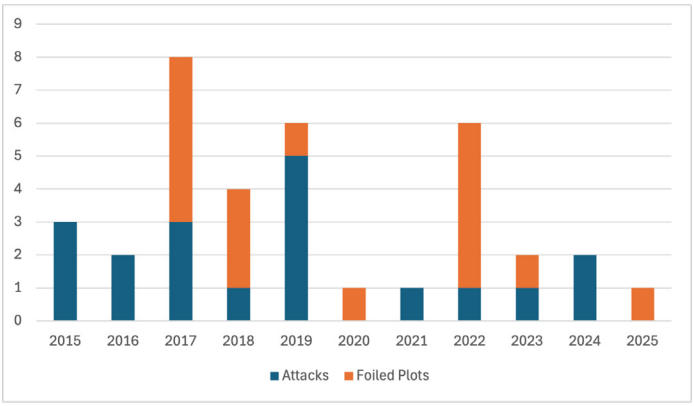

Figure 1: Terrorist attacks and plots against European elected officials, 2015-2025 (N=36)

A first interesting observation is that there does not seem to be a clear trend of increasing attacks or plots by terrorist actors against elected officials in Europe. On the contrary, if anything, there is a slightly decreasing trend. The majority of the attacks are concentrated in the years 2017-2019 and 2022. There were 23 incidents in the period 2015-2019, compared with 13 incidents in the period 2020-2025. This would suggest a fairly stable phenomenon, rather than a growing trend in terrorism tactics. The years 2020 and 2021 include only one incident each. This low occurrence could be explained by the successive lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, which decreased the time available for conducting attacks, although it could also be the result of data randomness.

Another interesting issue is that the majority (seven out of 13)

e The queries used the following combinations of key words: Country + politician + (foiled) terrorist plot / (foiled) terrorist attack; Country + politician / president / prime minister / minister / lawmaker / mayor + (foiled) terrorist plot / (foiled) terrorist attack.

f The snowball search method is a way of tracking down new cases or sources, by going through the texts and references of previously identified articles.

g As stated above, terrorist incidents in this dataset are strictly limited to those attacks that resulted in a conviction for terrorism offenses.

of the incidents that occurred since 2020 are coded as terrorism.[h] In comparison, only a third of the incidents during the period 2015-2019 were coded as terrorism. Since the number of terrorist incidents is similar between both periods (eight incidents in 2015-2019, seven incidents in 2020-2025), the distinction is linked to a variation in violent extremism rather than terrorism incidents. Thus, if there is actually a slight decrease of political violence against elected officials in Europe, it is to be found in the lower spectrum of violent activities (i.e., plots/attacks that did not result in terrorist convictions) rather than in the higher spectrum (i.e., plots/attacks that resulted in convictions for terrorism offense).

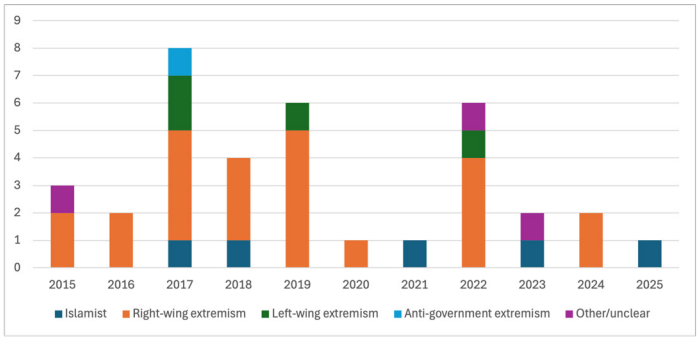

Figure 2: Terrorist attacks and plots against European elected officials by ideological motivation (N=36)

With regard to ideology, the majority of the attacks (64%) were linked to far-right extremism. The rest were jihadi attacks, left-wing extremism, one case of anti-government extremism, one case of state terrorism, and two cases that could not be clearly categorized (but were likely left-wing extremism). The persistence of attacks from far-right extremists over time is quite striking. While one would have logically expected a spike during the so-called 'refugees crisis' in 2015-2017, when over a million asylum-seekers entered Europe to flee the war in Syria and Iraq, far-right extremist attacks actually peaked in 2019. In contrast, the quasi absence of anti-government extremist attacks in the dataset is similarly remarkable, particularly as one would have expected such attacks during and just after the COVID pandemic.

In spite of these counter-intuitive observations, context clearly plays a role in the dataset. Indeed, several attacks were motivated by the broader discussions on immigration, in Germany and in the United Kingdom notably.[i] Other attacks were also closely connected with important political decisions or electoral contexts, occurring in a highly polarized setting.[j] However, while the socio-political context clearly influences specific cases and likely overall terrorism

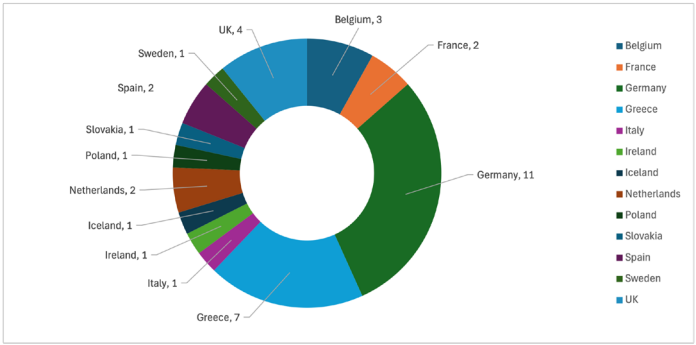

Figure 3: Terrorist attacks and plots against European elected officials by attack location (N=37) (Note: One attack was conducted with letter bombs sent in two separate countries. It was coded as a single act, but covering two distinct targets.)

trends, the dataset is too small and too limited to draw significant conclusions in this regard, as mentioned above.

Geographically, Germany is by far the most impacted country in the dataset, suffering 30% of the attacks. While this certainly raises questions, it could be explained by at least two elements. First, Germany is the largest country in Europe in terms of population, but also possibly in terms of elected officials.[k] Second, this might correlate with the fact that most attacks in the dataset originate from the far-right, since Germany is the European country with the largest far-right milieu with nearly 40,000 far-right extremists according to intelligence services, of which roughly a third is categorized as potentially violent.[21] In contrast, the preponderance of incidents in Greece (7) is slightly more surprising, although the activities of the left-wing and right-wing extremist milieus in the country are well documented.[22]

Regarding targets, the dataset suggests that national officials (63% of the incidents) are more exposed than local or international ones. To some extent, this is counter-intuitive since there are far more local than national elected officials across Europe. However, this could be explained by the larger salience of national targets (due to their media exposure), and the larger potential impact resulting from such attacks (in terms of media coverage). There could also possibly be a media reporting bias, as it cannot be excluded that attacks on local politicians receive less media attention—although the author was unable to verify this possible bias.

It is also notable that male politicians dominate the list of targets, as the dataset includes almost three times more male than female targets. However, this might be a mere reflection of the gender bias in politics, as men are overrepresented among elected officials.

Finally, it is worth noting that several officials appear more than once in the dataset, in spite of the small size of the sample. Two politicians appear twice (one Belgian, one Greek), and one Dutch politician appears three times in the dataset.

A New Era of Political Assassinations?

If terrorist attacks against European elected officials were fairly stable over the past decade, could things take a new turn? Could the terrorist plot against Belgian Prime Minister De Wever be the beginning of a new era of political assassinations? There are

h As stated above, the plot against the Belgian prime minister is still under investigation and could possibly result in terrorism convictions, hence adding one more case of terrorism in the period 2020-2025 (currently coded as 'violent extremism').

i Some examples in the dataset include the murders of Labour Member of Parliament Jo Cox in the United Kingdom in 2016 and local conservative official Walter Lübcke in Germany in 2019. Both officials were killed by far-right extremists.

j Some examples in the dataset include the assault on a German left-wing politician during the 2024 elections campaign; the firebombing of two Greek parliamentarians' private houses in the context of a highly sensitive vote on the political agreement between Greece and the Republic of North Macedonia in 2019; and the murder of Jo Cox in the United Kingdom in the context of the so-called Brexit vote.

k In addition to its federal parliament, which is one of the largest in Europe, Germany counts 16 regional parliaments and many local councils.

certainly some reasons to fear so.

To begin with, elected officials remain a core target of terrorist groups. It is clear that jihadi groups consider the leaders of enemy governments as legitimate targets. The same holds true for a good part of the far-left[l] and of the far-right. For instance, Norwegian far-right terrorist Anders Breivik had identified political leaders as priority targets in his 1,500-page manifesto, which remains highly influential within far-right communities to this day.[23] In Northern Ireland, a far-right group calling itself the "New Republican Movement" published a video in November 2025 in which it deemed local elected representatives "legitimate targets" due to their pro-immigration policies.[24]

The evolution of the broader terrorist landscape, which has been for some time dominated by lone actors as opposed to larger networks, provides one additional explanation for fearing a new era of political assassinations. Indeed, while seemingly on the rise across Europe, the terrorist threat has changed drastically compared to a decade ago.[25] Today's terrorist threat in Europe mostly comes from young isolated individuals, radicalized online, with limited connections to a terrorist group's leadership, if any, and virtually no combat skills.[26] This reality contrasts heavily with the big terrorist networks active in Europe between 2014-2017, which were trained and tasked by the Islamic State's leadership to cause mayhem on the continent.

Under this new reality, large-scale terrorist attacks are less likely, because they require a network, and demand time and resources to organize—in other words, they are mostly beyond reach for lone actors.[m] In contrast, smaller terrorist acts, such as stabbing attacks, are becoming the norm in Europe. Because these acts lack the dramatic impact of large attacks, lone offenders often try to compensate by choosing their targets more carefully. For individuals acting on their own, without a clear link to a larger terrorist campaign or network, it becomes even more important to ensure their attack sends a strong signal. In terrorism strategy, the so-called "propaganda of the deed" holds that the act itself—including the choice of target—is meant to communicate a message to a wider audience. The selection of targets is therefore critical to shaping a clear and unmistakable message.

As argued by Petter Nesser in his seminal book on jihadi terrorism in Europe, during periods of fragmented terrorist networks, as at the turn of the first decade of the 2000s, terrorist actors turn more naturally toward symbolic targets such as religious communities, minorities (e.g., LGBTQI+ or immigrants), or state representatives (e.g., police or elected officials)—as opposed to random and indiscriminate attacks.[27] The careful selection of these symbolic targets is a necessity to draw attention and spread the terrorist message wider.

A slightly different but related explanation can be found in the work of terrorism scholar Arie Perliger: Terrorist actors may resort to political assassination when they feel that other tactics have failed or are unlikely to produce the desired outcomes, or when they have less resources.[28] Indeed, political assassination is comparatively 'cheap' when compared to larger attrition campaigns and offers a 'quick win' in terms of visibility and highlighting the government's vulnerability.

Moreover, in the context of a resurging trend of state-sponsored terrorism, and active hybrid warfare in Europe, it is not far-fetched to imagine that threats against certain politicians are already on the rise and could increase further.

Besides the general terrorism landscape in Europe, which could influence the attractiveness of elected officials as targets for terrorist actors, there is another notable trend that appears at play. Although data is only fragmentary, there are strong indications that elected officials are increasingly victims of threats and violence generally, and not just in relation to terrorism.[29] Indeed, the majority of these threats remain below the threshold of terrorism and violent extremism, despite often also being politically motivated. This is very likely the result of a growing polarization of societies, which results notably in a seemingly rising popular support for violence against elected officials. Some recent polls and studies suggest that a growing number of citizens believe that violence can be considered acceptable to achieve political goals, which could include violence against elected officials. This certainly seems to be the case in the United States,[30] but could also be a trend in Europe.[31]

In Germany, the federal police (BKA) has registered a steady yearly increase of politically motivated crimes against state representatives (+262% between 2019 and 2024, from 1,673 to 6,059 crimes). Among these, the proportion of violent crimes against state representatives has also increased by 37% during the same period, reaching 122 violent attacks in 2024. The police data is corroborated by polls and studies showing that German local officials are increasingly subject to threats and violence.[32]

In France, similarly, local elected officials have been confronted with a growing number of threats and aggressions, rising from 1,716 reported cases in 2021 to 2,501 in 2024 (+46%). The number of cases involving physical violence also increased, reaching 250 attacks in 2024. This trend was considered serious enough that a new law was adopted in 2024 to better protect local elected officials.[33]

In the Netherlands, a 2024 report surveyed 1,082 decentralized political office holders on personal experiences with aggression and violence. It found that 45% of them encountered some form of aggression in the past year, which is up from 33% in 2020 and 23% in 2014.[34]

In Belgium, a poll conducted in 2023 among 483 local elected officials found that 18% had been the target of violence and of physical threats (up to 28% of the mayors).[35] Meanwhile, the number of public figures under police protection following threats has almost doubled between 2016 and 2024, reaching 101 individuals in 2025 according to the National Crisis Centre.[36]

In Norway, a study surveyed a number of politicians to ask about their exposure to threats and violence. In 2021, 36% of the members of the cabinet and parliament surveyed had received threats to themselves or close family members, an increase compared to similar surveys conducted in 2017 and 2013.[37]

Data from the United States points to an even more remarkable spike of threats against elected officials. A team of researchers from the University of Chicago compiled all charged acts of violence or threats of violence against members of the Congress since 2001, at federal and state levels, and noted a 600% increase between President Obama's second term and the first Trump administration (2017-2020), with a clear spike between 2016 and 2017 (+400%),

l For instance, Mauro Lubrano explains how anti-technology extremists, notably on the far-left, consider the "techno-elite" and its enablers (including government) the enemy. See Mauro Lubrano, *Stop the Machines: The Rise of Anti-Technology Extremism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2025).

m There are a number of significant exceptions, of course, as illustrated by the very lethal terrorist attacks perpetrated by Timothy McVeigh, Anders Breivik, or Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel (perpetrator of the 2016 Nice attack).

and a continuous yearly increase until reaching an all-high in 2021, and stabilizing at a high level since.[38] Interestingly, these threats are divided equally between Democratic and Republican members of Congress. Another study focused on federal charges regarding threats against public officials in the United States finds a similar sharp increase since 2017, reflecting in part a rise in ideologically motivated threats.[39] In their conclusions, the authors of the latter study also make some interesting observations, including the fact that the growing number of (anonymous) threats against officials constitutes a low-risk, low-cost strategy for political extremists, which can nonetheless create a significant impact on democratic processes.

This general climate of threats and violence against elected officials, which seem to be on the rise in Europe and North America, constitutes a clear danger to democracy since it appears to instill fear among officials or deter others to run for office, for example. It is the very heart of the democratic process that is affected. Furthermore, in line with the theory of "stochastic terrorism," the growing political polarization and online verbal violence could increase the risk of political violence against elected officials by lone actors.[40] [n] Finally, a dangerous spiraling of violence could be in the making, as a study suggests that violence against elected officials could further exacerbate support for political violence.[41]

Thus, in short, both the evolution of the terrorist threat landscape in Europe, and the growing levels of threats and political violence against elected officials—online and offline—suggest that terrorist and extremist attacks on political figures could rise in the future.

Conclusion

Throughout modern history, terrorist organizations have consistently targeted political leaders. This was, in their view, the most direct way to trigger change or achieve their objectives, in line with their ideology, but also the surest way to give their terrorist cause greater publicity.

Research conducted for this article identified 36 plots and attacks against European elected officials over the past 10 years, which demonstrates that the phenomenon remains a prevalent terrorist tactic. The data does not allow one to conclude that the phenomenon is rising in Europe. However, it is occurring in a broader context that could result in a growing trend of political assassinations in the future. At a minimum, it is an issue that certainly requires focus and increased vigilance. This is because certain contextual drivers—including a high but fragmented terrorist threat landscape, growing threats and violence against elected officials, as well as greater political polarization of societies and a declining trust in democratic institutions in Europe—could, as Perliger has argued, increase the risk of a resurgence of political assassinations as a terror tactic.[42]

Some measures could be taken to mitigate this risk. This would include, to begin with, a better monitoring of the trend in Europe and elsewhere to produce a better threat assessment. As mentioned above, existing data on the phenomenon is only fragmentary. Second, more prevention work could be done, online and offline, to raise awareness and increase resilience among elected officials against such threats and violence, taking example on existing tools available in Germany or Sweden.[43] Third, better reporting and assessment mechanisms could be established. For instance, in the Netherlands, there is a special police unit specifically dedicated to such threats.[44] Fourth, new laws could be adopted to further criminalize attacks against politicians. These could be modeled after legislation that has been created for this purpose in France or Germany.[45] Finally, more broadly, a reflection could be initiated on concrete security measures that could be developed to strengthen the protection of elected officials and public figures, and on the means necessary to implement such measures.[46] CTC

n Stochastic terrorism is a recent theory according to which the proliferation of violent language, particularly online, would increase the risk of physical violence.

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From Adolescence to Accountability: Prosecuting Teenagers for Terrorist-related Offenses in Europe

By Tanya Mehra and Merlina Herbach

This article examines how European criminal justice systems prosecute minors and young adults involved in terrorist-related activities. Using a dataset of 98 cases from Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (2020 to mid-2025), it analyzes legal frameworks and sentencing practices for juvenile extremist offenders (JEOs) aged 10 to 23 years. Nearly 30 percent of terrorism arrests in E.U. states in 2024 involved youths aged 12 to 20, primarily linked to jihadism with growing right-wing extremism cases. Most JEOs are convicted of preparatory offenses or possession and dissemination of extremist material rather than violent acts. The three examined countries employ different approaches: The United Kingdom sets the minimum age of criminal responsibility at 10 years; Germany at 14; the Netherlands at 12. Germany and the Netherlands extend juvenile justice provisions to young adults up to 21 and 23, respectively. While procedural safeguards exist, application varies significantly. Most JEOs receive custodial sentences (69 percent), often with probation and deradicalization requirements. Courts consider age, mental health, and rehabilitation efforts as mitigating factors. Additionally, this article underlines the importance of adopting a more flexible approach in the application of juvenile justice to young adults in practice and emphasizes the need for enhanced procedural safeguards when prosecuting alleged juvenile terrorists as ultima ratio.

Ever since the critically acclaimed Netflix miniseries "Adolescence" aired in March 2025, media coverage about (online) radicalization of minors and youth involved in terrorism and violent extremism has increased significantly, though authorities had already been expressing concerns about the number of especially young minors engaged in terrorist-related activities both online and offline. Indeed, the number of youths involved in terrorist and violent extremist activities had grown across the European Union in 2024.[1] Nearly 30 percent of all individuals arrested on terrorism suspicion in E.U. member states in that year were aged between 12 and 20 years. While the vast majority of these cases are related to jihadism, a growing number of minors are involved in right-wing extremism or other criminal networks with links to extremism such as the 764 network.[a] The number of teenagers that are being arrested in the United Kingdom is also rising, in particular in relation to offenses regarding online activities such as the possession and dissemination of terrorist material.[2]

While many youths engaged in extremist- and terrorist-related activities are channeled through prevention programs, data shows that a considerable portion of youth still end up in the criminal justice system. Hence, in addition to exploring operational and demographic aspects such as online radicalization pathways of youths,[3] and the profiles of minors in extremist plots and attacks,[4] it is crucial to understand how minors and young adults can be treated by the criminal justice system in a way that serves both the interests of counterterrorism as well as the interests of the accused youngsters.

This article first provides an overview of how different jurisdictions in Europe hold minors and young adults accountable for terrorist-related conduct. It does so by providing an overview of the applicable legal frameworks in three countries with different legal traditions that are all facing increasing numbers of young extremist and terrorist offenders, specifically Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.[5] A dataset compiling domestic jurisprudence on incidents involving alleged perpetrators between the age of 10 and 23 years who were tried between January 2020 and June 2025 illustrates the practical application of these

a The 764 network emerged from the Com network and is a constantly evolving ecosystem of splinter groups and offshoots. It operates at the intersection of violent extremism, child sexual abuse, and extreme violence, specifically targeting vulnerable youth online. See Marc-André Argentino, Barrett G, and M.B. Tyler, "764: The Intersection of Terrorism, Violent Extremism, and Child Sexual Exploitation," GNET, January 19, 2024.

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frameworks. These observations from practice shed light on the type of terrorist conduct that youths and young adults are charged with, sentences imposed on them, and the role that age and other personal circumstances play in sentencing. Based on these findings, this article concludes by outlining some research gaps and shares observations and trends for how to hold alleged young extremist offenders criminally accountable.

The Dataset

The following analysis is informed by a dataset of criminal cases from Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom involving individuals with alleged extremist background aged between 10 and 23 years of age. The dataset is compiled of relevant cases involving terrorist-related charges in which a first instance verdict was reached between January 2020 and June 2025. Relevant cases were identified based on previous case-law related research by the authors as well as by searching domestic jurisprudence databases and press releases from relevant authorities. In doing so, the authors used standardized search terms in Dutch, English, and German relating to young age, juvenile justice, and different ideologies. This list of cases was checked against case-law overviews in existing research.[b] Finally, online searches using the names of already identified defendants, courts, and key terminology in all of the above-mentioned languages corroborated the collected information.

The dataset compiling 98 cases (29 from Germany, 16 from the Netherlands, and 53 from the United Kingdom) is considered fairly comprehensive, albeit not exhaustive. Nevertheless, it allows for preliminary analyses and first insights into the prosecution of alleged young extremist offenders in different European jurisdictions.

Juvenile Justice and Youths Involved in Terrorism

For the purpose of this research, individuals aged between 10 and 23 years old who are allegedly involved in terrorist- or extremist-related crimes will be referred to as juvenile extremist offenders (JEO). This term most accurately reflects the different levels of involvement in extremism or terrorism by these youths, which is not always characterized by violent acts. In fact, only one 10- to 15-year-old across the entire dataset was convicted for violent acts. Similarly, 15 percent of the 16- to 18-year-old group, and 10 percent of the 19- to 23-year-old offenders in the dataset committed violent acts against persons or objects. Around two-thirds of all 10- to 23-year-old JEOs were convicted of non-violent acts, while 23 percent were convicted for preparing acts of terrorist violence.

Acknowledging that young people are still developing physically, psychologically, and socially is the guiding assumption behind the development of juvenile justice systems. Common criminal justice is not considered suitable for youth offenders as it does not adequately consider the rights and needs of children and does not provide sufficient procedural safeguards during criminal proceedings to protect children's fundamental rights.[6] Hence, the overall objective of juvenile justice is to take the interests of the child into account and to facilitate the reintegration of youth offenders.[7] To this end, the European Union and the Council of Europe have adopted legal standards and guidelines on how to ensure that age-appropriate measures and safeguards are adopted during criminal proceedings.[8]

These standards are applicable to all juveniles regardless of the type of crimes they are accused of and thus also to JEOs. The Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF), consisting of 32 members including Germany, Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, adopted the non-binding Neuchâtel Memorandum on Good Practices for Juvenile Justice in a Counterterrorism Context to address the needs of children engaged in terrorist-related activity specifically.[9] However, children in the context of terrorism and violent extremism could often be considered victims themselves as they may have been exploited by terrorist groups or extremist groups, which further complicates determining their culpability.[10] Furthermore, due to the nature of counterterrorism legislation, alleged JEOs can be subjected to special investigative powers and specific procedures under counterterrorism laws, for example longer pre-trial detention. Additionally, alleged JEOs may specifically be impacted by the collection and sharing of data and watchlisting.[11]

Against this background, the principle of ultima ratio—meaning that criminal justice should only be invoked as a last resort due to its coercive nature—is of particular significance for JEOs.[c] When minors have not committed serious offenses and do not pose an imminent threat to others or society at large—as suggested by the data analyzed for this article and outlined below—one might consider prioritizing diversionary and increased preventive measures over criminal prosecution.

Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility

Although, based on scientific findings, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recommends states set the minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR) at 14 years regardless of the type of offense,[12] this varies significantly across national jurisdictions and is often set far below the age of 14 (Table 1).[13] Minors below the MACR who have allegedly committed an offense are recommended to be treated by the social welfare system.[14]

This approach has indeed been adopted by many states. In Germany, for example, alleged offenders below the MACR, meaning below 14 years, and their families can receive pedagogical support from child welfare services.[15] Only if such a cooperation fails can family courts be ordered to intervene and under narrow conditions take restrictive measures such as placement in a closed pedagogical facilities to avoid significant risk for self-harm or harm to others.[16] Similarly in the Netherlands, among other non-criminal measures, children younger than 12 years suspected of having committed an offense can still be questioned by law enforcement under special protective measures or be referred to a family court.[17] Lastly, in

b Notably, researchers at the University of Southampton track JEOs in the United Kingdom through their Childhood Innocence Project. The July dataset of that project was also used to complement the preliminary dataset for this research. See "Research project: Childhood Innocence Project," University of Southampton, n.d.

c The principle of ultima ratio is also particularly relevant to juveniles with regard to criminal investigations and sentencing. The use of investigative powers, pre-trial detention, and imprisonment should only be applied when strictly necessary, proportionate, and serving a legitimate aim. Piet Hein van Kempen, "Criminal Justice and the Ultima Ratio Principle: Need for Limitation, Exploration and Consideration" in P.H.P.H.M.C. van Kempen and M. Jendly eds., *Overuse in the criminal justice system. On criminalization, prosecution and imprisonment* (Cambridge: Intersentia, 2019).

England and Wales, one measure to support children below the age of 10 who allegedly showed otherwise criminalized conduct, is for family courts to issue a child safety order. Such an order determines individual measures to ensure the child receives adequate care and support.[18]

However, once a child has reached the MACR and allegedly committed a crime, it is not always clear whether they will be subjected to juvenile justice or common criminal justice. Some jurisdictions allow for the application of juvenile justice for young adults older than 18 years depending on their level of maturity and the specific circumstances of their case.[19] Conversely, against the advice of international children's rights bodies,[20] some states such as the Netherlands allow underaged individuals above the age of 16 to be subjected to common criminal justice (Table 1).[21]

Also against the advice of international children's rights bodies,[22] some countries such as Australia have lowered the MACR for certain serious offenses.[23] Similar debates about whether the MACR should be lowered also continue in other countries, including Sweden[d] and Germany.[24] Nevertheless, longitudinal studies show that the overall number of juveniles involved in crime has been declining in several European countries.[25] Furthermore, a study conducted in Denmark, where the MACR has been temporarily lowered by one year, found that there is little evidence to support that the lower MACR had a deterrent effect.[26] These findings suggest that lowering the MACR or creating exceptions for terrorist offenses risks undermining children's rights without achieving significant deterrent effects. Furthermore, in line with the ultima ratio principle, subjecting juveniles and developmentally immature young adults who likely have limited exposure to the criminal justice system could bar or potentially undermine preventive interventions. Indeed, evidence from jurisdictions prioritizing early prevention over criminal prosecution suggests positive outcomes. Scotland's 'Getting it right for every child' policy, which raised the MACR and put more emphasis on early intervention, significantly reduced cases reaching the youth courts while youth offending declined overall.[27] This suggests that addressing root causes of youth delinquency—which is of particular importance in terrorist-related contexts where ideological exploitation may play a role—can be more effective than punitive criminal justice responses.

Table 1: Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility by Country

	Germany	Netherlands	England, Wales, and Northern Ireland	Scotland[e]
Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility	14 years[28]	12 years[29]	10 years[30]	12 years[31]
Age Range for Juvenile Justice	14-21 years[32]	12-23 years[33]	10-18 years[34]	12-18 years[35]
Age Range for Common Criminal Justice	18 years and older[36]	16 years and older[37]	18 years and older[38]	18 years and older[39]

When a case in Germany or the Netherlands involves alleged criminal acts committed at different ages, these acts can be tried jointly in one case, requiring the competent court to determine whether to apply juvenile or common criminal justice in the joint case.[40] German law explicitly proscribes that such a decision depends on whether the primary focus of the proceedings is on crimes committed at an age or level of maturity that gives rise to juvenile justice or at an age or level of maturity that gives rise to common criminal justice.[41]

Lastly, several countries such as the Netherlands and Germany take a more flexible approach to the application of juvenile justice by providing for age ranges (Table 1) in which it is up to the discretion of judges to determine whether to apply juvenile justice or common criminal justice. In doing so, these countries attempt to accommodate the special needs of adolescents.[42] However, adolescents are defined differently in these two countries, with the age range in Germany being 18 to 21 years and 16 to 23 years in the Netherlands. These more flexible approaches to juvenile justice in Germany and the Netherlands are also reflected in the breakdown of criminal justice frameworks applied to JEOs in different age categories pursuant to the dataset. While in the United Kingdom any JEO above the age of 18 is automatically subjected to common criminal justice, 87.5 percent of the JEOs in Germany between 18 and 21 years were subjected to certain elements of juvenile justice. However, only 15 percent of the JEOs in the Netherlands between the age of 16 and 23 were subjected to certain elements of juvenile criminal justice, suggesting that the practical application of these provisions to adolescents and young adults remains limited.

Elements of Juvenile Justice

In line with the rationale of juvenile justice set out above, these frameworks do not mean that alleged offenders of a young age are automatically being held criminally accountable. Instead, juvenile justice frameworks govern means of diversion and non-criminal

d Pursuant to the Swedish Criminal Code, children below the age of 15 years cannot be sentenced. However, in exceptional cases they can stand trial to determine their guilt. In April 2025, a 14-year-old teenager affiliated with the 764 network was found guilty of attempted murder by a Swedish court, but was not sentenced. The Swedish government has drafted a proposal to lower the age of criminal responsibility from 15 to 13 years in the hope to address the involvement of youngsters in gang violence. See Charles Szumski, "Sweden to lower age of criminal responsibility to 13 amid gang violence crisis," Euractiv, October 27, 2025.

e Since the majority of cases concerning JEOs in the dataset were tried by courts in England and Wales and due to the significant differences between the criminal justice system in Scotland and that in England and Wales, this article will only elaborate on criminal procedure in England and Wales.

justice procedures. In cases in which alleged JEOs are indeed subjected to criminal proceedings, juvenile justice provides for age-specific safeguards, relating to criminal procedure, sentencing, and penalties.

Youth Courts

A common feature of juvenile justice is the use of specialized criminal courts, also referred to as youth courts, although the scope and procedures may differ between countries. In the United Kingdom, youth courts have jurisdiction to hear cases of minors aged between 10 and 17 years for less serious crimes such as theft and drug offenses. Notably, there is no jury in a youth court, and the case is adjudicated by magistrates or a judge.[43] Cases involving more serious offenses, including terrorism offenses, are generally heard by a Crown Court.[44] Hence, only eight JEOs who were prosecuted in the United Kingdom were confirmed to have been tried at a youth court.

The Netherlands has a more flexible, yet complex system. Minors between 12 and 15 years are always tried in youth courts. However, depending on the level of maturity, the seriousness of the crime, and the circumstances of a case, 16- and 17-year-olds can be tried either in a youth or a regular criminal court but always receive youth sentences.[45] Young adults between 18 and 23 years are tried in regular criminal courts, but can be sentenced under juvenile justice depending on the personality of the accused or the circumstances under which the alleged offense was committed.[46] In practice, factors that should be taken into account in determining the personality and circumstances are whether the accused is attending school, living at home with their parents, requires support in relation to cognitive limitations, or is still receptive to educational programs.[47]

Juvenile offenders in Germany are usually tried before a youth judge, youth jury, or youth chamber.[f] However, certain offenses are excluded and are always tried in a regular criminal court. So-called state protection matters, which among others include terrorist offenses and core international crimes, are tried at a Higher Regional Court on first instance regardless of the age of the accused.[48] Thus, all JEOs are tried at a Higher Regional Court when they are charged with terrorist offenses. Nonetheless, additional procedural safeguards are in place.[49]

Additional Procedural Safeguards

To adhere to the age-specific needs of juveniles, common procedural arrangements exist—next to youth sentences—in all three countries assessed for this research. This, for example, includes the possibility of holding proceedings behind closed doors; imposing reporting restrictions on the media, such as anonymizing the defendants; allowing them to participate in a child-friendly way in criminal proceedings; involving parents in the criminal proceedings and child protection services; and limiting the duration and location of pre-trial detention. These safeguards are particularly relevant when JEOs are being tried before a regular criminal court.

When prosecuting JEOs, courts in Germany and the United Kingdom most frequently order reporting restrictions, although they have been lifted after sentencing in several cases in the United Kingdom. In cases involving underage JEOs as defendants in Germany and the Netherlands, it has also been confirmed that child protection services were involved in the proceedings. Only five of 98 cases involving JEOs were held behind closed doors.[g] Across all three countries, however, the one juvenile justice element that is most frequently applied to JEOs, regardless of whether they are being tried at a youth court or not, is sentencing pursuant to juvenile justice frameworks.

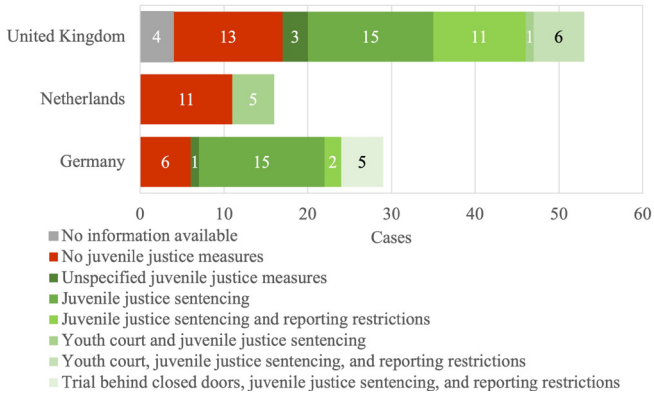

Figure 1: Juvenile Justice Safeguards Applied in JEO Trials by Country

Ideological Background, Gender, and Charges

The ideological currents of JEOs in the dataset are mainly two-fold with 53 percent jihadi JEOs and 46 percent right-wing extremist (RWX) JEOs.[h] Notably, the share of female JEOs (18 percent overall) solely relates to jihadism (35 percent of all jihadi JEOs). All but one woman were tried in Germany and the Netherlands and have attempted or succeeded in traveling to Syria or Iraq.[i] Unlike the United Kingdom, Germany and Netherlands have repatriated several women from northeast Syria in the early 2020s and subsequently prosecuted them for their involvement with terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and Jabhat al-Nusra.[50] Overall, girls and young women are mostly being convicted of supporting acts, including aiding and abetting terrorist offenses committed by male offenders or membership in a terrorist organization.[j] While there are no RWX girls or young women in the present dataset, this should not lead to the assumption that women are not active or engaged in right-wing extremism. In fact, research

f The expected penalty, significance of the case, and involvement of underaged victims are factors determining which type of youth court has jurisdiction over a specific case in Germany. See Sects 33-41 JGG.

g All five cases that were held behind closed doors involved JEOs between 16 and 21 years tried in Germany.

h In one case, the ideological current of the 15-year-old defendant in the United Kingdom could not be established from the media coverage without further information from the competent court or investigation authorities.

i In December 2024, a 17-year-old girl was convicted in the United Kingdom for possession of a document for terrorist purposes under Sect. 50 of the Terrorism Act 2000. See "Sentencing Remarks," Recorder of London, *Rex v. Timaeva*, March 7, 2025.

j This finding was also confirmed with regard to jihadi women in previous research on women prosecuted in different European countries for their involvement with the Islamic State and other jihadi organizations. See Tanya Mehra, Thomas Renard, and Merlina Herbach, "Managing Female Violent Extremist Offenders in Europe: A Data-driven Comparative Analysis" in Tanya Mehra, Thomas Renard, and Merlina Herbach eds., *Female Jihadis Facing Justice: Comparing Approaches in Europe* (The Hague: ICCT Press, 2024), pp. 131-139.

has shown that just like women involved in jihadi terrorism, women and girls involved in right-wing extremism are involved in mainly non-violent roles, propaganda, and recruitment activities, as seen, for example, with women involved in the January 6th attack.[51]

In all three countries, most JEOs are convicted for preparatory offenses or the possession and dissemination of extremist material. Only a small proportion is responsible for serious acts of violence that directly harm individual victims or society. (See Appendix A.)

Forty-two percent of the convictions of JEOs in the United Kingdom relate to, mostly digital, possession of terrorist material (sect. 58 Terrorism Act 2000) and 29 percent to dissemination of terrorist publications (sect. 2 Terrorism Act 2006), also referred to as documentary offenses. Furthermore, 15 of the convictions of JEOs in the United Kingdom relate to encouragement of terrorism (sect. 1 Terrorism Act 2006). Similarly, three JEOs in the Netherlands were convicted of incitement to terrorism (art. 47 SR) and one JEO in Germany was convicted of showing insignias of a prohibited organization (sect. 86a StGB). However, thought or speech offenses such as incitement, encouragement, and glorification of terrorism may interfere with children's right to freedom of expression and in their process of forming their identity, which is often driven by curiosity and being susceptible to peer pressure and provocation.[52] Furthermore, criminality related to the mere possession of material that can likely be used for terrorist activities can disproportionally affect minors who may be simply thoughtless or curious rather than intending to participate or support acts of terrorism. This is because terrorist intention of the person possessing such material does not need to be proven under U.K. law and can thus also capture thoughtless or curious minors.[k]

In addition to terrorist-related offenses, several RWX JEOs in the United Kingdom are more recently also being convicted of possession of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and coercion.[l] And in Germany and the Netherlands, several jihadi JEOs were also convicted for core international crimes, including genocide and crimes against humanity, committed in Syria and Iraq.[53]

Sentencing and Penalties

The most common element of juvenile justice in relation to JEOs across all the three countries is handing down penalties in accordance with juvenile justice standards.[m] The purpose of sentencing youth offenders is distinct from adults, and all three jurisdictions recognize the need to take the age and welfare of the children into account, placing a stronger focus on education, reintegration, and reducing recidivism.[54]

According to the UK Sentencing Council, courts can impose a variety of sentences to juvenile offenders with custodial sentences, meaning imprisonment that generally can only be imposed for the most serious crimes, being the last resort.[55] Non-custodial sentences range from financial orders and community sentences with specific conditions, which are also referred to as a youth rehabilitation order, to specific intensive supervision orders or youth referral orders that can only be imposed on otherwise imprisonable offenses upon guilty plea.[56] Notably, U.K. courts can also impose a parenting order for minors below the age of 17 years.[57] The sentencing of JEOs under the age of 18 is also affected by the adoption of Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Act in 2021, as it introduces a special dangerous child offenders category where the maximum sentence for the offense is life imprisonment. When applied, it introduces a mandatory period of supervision after release, and withdraws the possibility for early release.[58] While JEOs older than 18 years are to be sentenced in accordance with the purposes of sentencing of adults, courts still need to take their level of maturity into consideration when determining the appropriate sentence and place them in a young offender institution.[59] The U.K. government recognizes that indeed many JEOs do not pose a significant security risk to society and is therefore planning to introduce a youth diversion order that aims to prevent them from engaging further in terrorist activities at an early stage and avoid criminal prosecution.[n]

In the Netherlands, juveniles and young adults between the ages of 16 and 23 can be tried either pursuant to adult criminal law or juvenile justice. Notably, procedural safeguards are not altered and thus juveniles until the age of 18 are tried in juvenile courts but adult sentences can be imposed, whereas young adults between 18 and 23 years old are tried in regular courts but youth sentences can be imposed.[60] Youth sentences can include a custodial sentence; community service, which can be a combination of labor and educational measures; or financial fines. For juveniles younger than 16 years, the maximum permitted period of detention is one year. For those aged above but sentenced according to juvenile justice, the maximum prison term is two years.[61] A recent study revealed that juveniles between 16 and 17 years who are sentenced under adult criminal law receive longer sentences, often have a criminal record, and are less likely to be receptive for educational interventions compared to their peers sentenced pursuant to juvenile criminal law.[62] The present dataset only includes two minors in the Netherlands aged 16 or 17 who have received youth sentences, thus making it impossible to draw any comparable observations for JEOs in particular.

In Germany, juveniles are sentenced according to juvenile justice standards regardless of whether they are being tried in a youth court or in a regular criminal court.[63] This can also be applicable to young adults between 18 and 21 years as detailed above. While this sentencing can entail certain special sentences such as educational or disciplinary measures, custodial sentences are handed down in more serious cases.[64] The length of custodial youth sentences usually ranges from six months to five years.[65] However, for offenses in which common criminal justice provides for a custodial sentence of more than 10 years, the maximum custodial sentence under

k While a minor might fulfill all elements of the crime, prosecutors do have the discretion to decide whether prosecution is suitable. Factors that are taken into account include whether there is a link with terrorist activities or a terrorist mindset and whether a criminal justice approach is suitable.

l First, such cases are now also being prosecuted in Germany, as shown by the arrest of a 20-year-old in June 2025. He is suspected to have committed more than 120 offenses relating to sexual abuse of minors, murder committed through a third person, and instigation to suicide of minors between 2021 and 2023. See "'White Tiger': Neue Details zu 20-jährigem Hamburger Mordverdächtigen," NDR, June 19, 2025.

m This is applicable to both JEOs that are still underaged at the time of trial but also to adult defendants who committed crimes as juveniles, in accordance with Article 7(1)s.2 European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

n Although the current proposal for the youth diversion order shows similarities to the existing Prevent program, the order would entail certain restrictive measures. "Crime and Policing Bill" doc no. HL Bill 111, UK Parliament, June 19, 2025, part 14, chapter 1.

juvenile justice is 10 years. To provide for more discretion and enhance educational and rehabilitative efforts, fixed sentencing ranges, as prescribed for specific offenses under common criminal justice, are not applicable in juvenile justice proceedings.[o]

Since German and Dutch courts have discretion on whether to sentence young adults of a certain age range pursuant to juvenile or adult justice, courts in both countries regularly consider the individual personal circumstances of the JEO and whether the convict would benefit from the educational focus of juvenile sentencing. In doing so, they rely on expert advice from youth services, as provided by law.

However, not all JEOs tried in Germany and the Netherlands were still below the age of 21 or 23 years, respectively, at the time of trial. In these cases, courts provided more elaborate reasons on why they applied juvenile justice sentencing or not, where they had discretion to do so. In the case of Monika K., a German court found that even though the defendant was above the age of 21 years for most of her time with the Islamic State, the charges predominately related to actions and personal circumstances when she was younger than 21 years with a limited maturity. Furthermore, the court concluded that although she was 28 years old at sentencing, she could still benefit from educational measures under juvenile justice given her efforts to mature further.[66] Hence, the court sentenced her according to juvenile justice frameworks. Conversely, in the case of Ilham B., who was between 19 and 23 years old while being a member of Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State and also 28 years old at the time of trial on first instance, a Dutch court found that the educational measures under juvenile justice were no longer suitable since she had already matured, was a mother of two children, and lived separately from her parents.[67]

Even when JEOs were sentenced pursuant to adult criminal justice, their young age at the time of commission of the crimes was often taken into consideration as a mitigating factor in all three countries (38 percent of respective cases in which sentencing considerations are known). Overall, judges in all three countries took similar mitigating and aggravating factors into account when sentencing JEOs pursuant to juvenile justice (Table 2). Although not among the most common mitigating factors, courts in all three countries had several cases in which they had to consider undue delays in proceedings as a mitigating factor.

Table 2: Most Common Mitigating and Aggravating Factors for JEOs Sentenced Pursuant to Juvenile Justice in Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom

	Mitigating Factors	Aggravating Factors
Germany	• (Partial) confession • No criminal record • Distanced themselves from radical views • Showed remorse	• Particular cruelty of terrorist organization • Severity of individual guilt/ offenses • Crimes committed based on radical views
Netherlands	• Mental health issues • Preliminary de-radicalization/ rehabilitation progress • No criminal record • Young age	• Severity of individual guilt/ offenses • Attack only prevented through intervention
United Kingdom	• Young age • Mental health issues • Preliminary de-radicalization/ rehabilitation progress • Inept preparation	• Risk to society • Crimes committed based on radical views • Amount of terrorist material shared/possessed

Ultimately, the vast majority (69 percent) of the JEOs received custodial sentences (Appendix B). In half of these cases, custodial sentences were combined with additional measures such as probation periods. These probation periods often involved special conditions, including but not limited to monitoring of online activities, participation in deradicalization programs, and reporting duties. In the United Kingdom, 13 JEOs sentenced pursuant to juvenile justice received a youth referral order.[68] In determining whether to impose a custodial sentence on underaged JEOs or not, sentencing judges in the United Kingdom often considered in favor of the defendant when they made first successful steps to deradicalize during the proceedings.[p]

Lastly, 13 JEOs in the United Kingdom also received a terrorism notification requirement, meaning they must regularly report correct up-to-date personal information to the authorities.[69] This requirement has been imposed on JEOs as young as 16 years at the time of sentencing for between 10- and 30-years duration. The duration and continued burden of this requirement conflicts with the educational and rehabilitative focus of juvenile justice.

However, it is not only the long-term reporting duties that

o Similarly, the threshold for pre-trial detention of juveniles is higher than for adults, providing that other preliminary and educational measure should be considered first and that the proceedings should be conducted in a particularly timely manner in case the juvenile suspect is placed in pre-trial detention (Sect. 72 JGG).

p Such considerations, including assessment of pre-sentence reports, which among others contain information on preliminary de-radicalization efforts, as well as the level of harm that was or was likely to be caused and the risk to society posed by the offender must be made when deciding whether or not to impose a custodial sentence as last resort (sect. 6.44 sentencing children and young people guideline).

can have an adverse impact on the rehabilitation of young terrorist offenders. A terrorism conviction itself can have negative implications when applying for employment, educational opportunities, or insurance. These effects might persist well into adulthood, raising questions about proportionality, particularly given that the majority of JEOs in this dataset were convicted of preparatory or speech-related offenses rather than violent acts causing direct harm to individuals or society.

Conclusion

Tracking cases of juveniles and young adults involved in terrorist conduct remains a challenge. Many minors fall below the age of criminal responsibility, are subject to administrative measures, or are merely reprimanded by police, making it difficult to establish precise figures. What is clear, however, is that the number of juveniles and young adults engaged in terrorist-related activities in Europe is rising. In particular, the number of arrests of minors linked to the 764 network and other off-shoots of the Com network is increasing;[70] however, many of these fell outside the temporal scope of the dataset used for this research and are thus not included in the data. Media reporting—particularly since the airing of "Adolescence"—has amplified the image of the "teenage terrorist," yet data suggests a more nuanced reality.

Findings from Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom reveal several important considerations for policy and practice. First, the data shows that the number of JEOs linked to jihadism and prosecuted in these three countries between 2020 and mid-2025 is only slightly higher than of those linked to right-wing extremism, confirming that jihadi and right-wing extremist groups both exploit youth for their purposes. Second, prosecuting JEOs is resource-intensive, and the profound long-term consequences of criminal convictions raise questions about proportionality, particularly given that most JEOs are convicted of preparatory or documentary offenses rather than violent acts causing direct harm.

Recognizing that brain development continues into early adulthood[71] necessitates a flexible approach and the extension of juvenile justice provisions to young adults. This not only includes procedural safeguards to protect JEOs from disproportionate counterterrorism powers such as prolonged pre-trial detention and watchlisting, but also sentencing practices that are tailored to individual maturity, seriousness of the offense, and receptiveness to educational programs.

Finally, the absence of prosecutions involving young women in right-wing extremism cases, despite documented involvement in these movements, points to gaps in understanding gendered patterns of extremist engagement that require further research to inform comprehensive responses. CTC

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Appendix A: Most Common Convictions per Age Range by Country

	Germany			Netherlands			United Kingdom			
	10-15	16-18	19-23	10-15	16-18	19-23	10-15	16-18	19-23	**Total**
Possession of material likely to be useful to a person committing / preparing an act of terrorism							10	20	6	**36**
Preparation of terrorist offense	1	3	5	2	1	9	2	3	3	**29**
Membership in a terrorist/proscribed organization	1	2	11	1	2	8	1			**26**
Dissemination of terrorist material/ publications							7	13	5	**25**
Encouragement of terrorism							3	7	3	**13**
Incitement to terrorism					2	1				**3**
Terrorist training						3				**3**
Threat to commit terrorist offense					1	2				**3**
Inviting support to terrorism							2			**2**
Support of a terrorist organization	1						1			**2**
Attempted founding of terrorist organization			1							**1**
Aiding and abetting preparation of a terrorist offense			1							**1**
Dissemination of prohibited insignias		1								**1**
Attempted membership in terrorist organization			1							**1**
Failure to disclose info about acts of terrorism							1			**1**
TOTAL	**3**	**6**	**19**	**3**	**6**	**23**	**27**	**43**	**17**	**147**

Appendix B: Type of Sentence per Age Range by Country

	Germany			Netherlands			United Kingdom			
	10-15	16-18	19-23	10-15	16-18	9-23	0-15	6-18	9-23	**Total**
Custodial	1	4	13		1	3	3	5	3	**33**
Custodial with additional requirements				3	2	7	2	14	6	**34**
Suspended on probation	1	4	5					2	1	**13**
Youth Referral Order							7			**7**
Youth Referral Order with additional orders							4	2		**6**
Community order								4		**4**
No information		1								**1**
TOTAL	**2**	**9**	**18**	**3**	**3**	**10**	**16**	**27**	**10**	**98**