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The Protracted Survival of Boko Haram From a Revolutionary Warfare Perspective

Since 2009 Boko Haram has been carrying out terrorist attacks in the northeastern part of Nigeria. In 2015 the group was seen as the world's deadliest terrorist organization, however, due to internal disagreements in 2016, Boko Haram split into two factions, namely the Islamic State – West Africa Province (ISWAP) and *Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād* (JAS), which is still often referred to by its original name – Boko Haram. While the competition between these factions made way for the Nigerian government to retake formerly lost territories, attacks from Boko Haram continue, and government forces have yet to fully quell the insurgency. This article surveys the protracted survival of Boko Haram through their operating practices by basing itself on the two primary models of revolutionary warfare (people's war by Mao Zedong and *Foquismo* by Che Guevara). It takes note of the similarities between traditional revolutionary and contemporary jihadist ways of thought. Despite these similarities, crucial distinctions can also be made between the two factions of Boko Haram in order to explain their comparatively different levels of success. The article is divided into 3 primary bodies, each examining one of the three pillars (ideological, popular-support and military) that are required for a successful revolution. Comparisons between ISWAP and JAS are made in each section. Finally, the addition and comparison of the results stemming from each part are summarized and aid in trying to understand the protracted survival of Boko Haram.

Introduction

The Lake Chad region, and, in particular, Nigeria's Borno state, is a notoriously adverse environment. It is home to a Muslim-majority population that experiences political marginalization, droughts, desertification and, most importantly, jihadist extremism. While the president of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, stated that the jihadist group had been 'technically defeated' back in 2015, Boko Haram proved itself to be a stern opponent, managing to

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reorganise following its defeats and continued to wage a prolonged struggle against Nigeria and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). It is true that the MNJTF had successfully liberated the majority of the jihadist-controlled territory; however, they have yet to find a way to fully defeat Boko Haram, and the group continues to operate around Lake Chad, the Sambisa forest and in the border regions of Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon.

Some may blame Nigerian authorities and MNJTF counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine, highlighting factors such as corruption or a lack of transparency in practice; however, if one were to examine the situation from a different perspective, namely, the operating nature of Boko Haram, other arguments may arise. Certain aspects of jihadist strategy, doctrine and practices may be other causes for their success (Hassan, 2021). In other words, revolutionary-style warfare and complex approaches to both the civilian and military spheres may also be responsible for the protracted survival of Boko Haram, as, according to some scholars (Balcells & Kalyvas, 2015), guerilla-style tactics paired with popular support and non-military operating features can arguably make an insurgent group more resilient.

This article will elucidate the aforementioned hypothesis by drawing a comparison between the two revolutionary schools of thought, Maoist and Focoist, and linking their respective ideas to the operating principles of the respective factions of Boko Haram.

This article will propose the following questions:

- 1) Why has Boko Haram managed to survive for so long?
- 2) How did the faction of the Islamic State – West Africa Province (ISWAP) become more successful than *Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād* (JAS)?
- 3) How did the operating nature of Boko Haram influence their survival?

This article aims to answer these and other questions, with the primary problem being - what factors contributed the most to the prolonged survival of ISWAP and JAS, respectively? This article analyses the protracted survival of Boko Haram as an insurgency through the lens of revolutionary warfare theory and claims that the lesser success of JAS in comparison to ISWAP can be attributed to the latter's more population-friendly and sustainable approach, as opposed to JAS' more violent ways.

Even though other researchers have already drawn comparisons between jihadist groups such as Boko Haram and revolutionary warfare theories, there is a lack of systematic and meta-analysis trying to ascertain the reasons behind Boko Haram's protracted survival. Akali Omeni (2018) and Edward Stoddard (2019) have already made comparisons between the doctrine of Boko Haram

and the ideas of Maoism and Focoism, proving that such comparisons are not out of the question. Craig Whiteside (2015) and Stathys N. Kalyvas (2015) examined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) through this framework, and Kenneth Payne (2011) had previously covered Al Qaeda's link to the theory. The tactics of Boko Haram have also been covered by Akali Omeni (2020), Rick Burns (2015), Jason Warner, Hilary Matfess (2017) and others. James J. Hentz and Hussein Solomon (2017) provide a broader perspective of the insurgency and responses to it. What the aforementioned authors do not answer, however, is the question of how all these factors interact and compare with each other in shaping the jihadist group's prolonged survival? With the help of previously mentioned secondary research, this article aims to fill in a gap in research by highlighting the features of Boko Haram's operational nature that contributed the most to their protracted survival. This article complements the research on revolutionary warfare ideas applied by jihadist groups and expands¹ it by compiling the findings of numerous researchers in different categories and comparing them.

Needless to say, the security situation in the Lake Chad basin remains unstable. Due to the continued operations of local jihadist groups, certain consequences can be expected to arise. First and foremost is the continued loss of governance over terrorist-occupied lands and the devastating deterioration of the livelihoods of local people. In a broader sense, growing terrorist activity and the emergence of transnational organised crime result in a loss of control over the primary trade routes passing through the Sahel and up into the Sahara. As a result, more drugs and illegal weapons may continue to reach Europe (Oneko, 2017). Another potential consequence that should be receiving more attention is increased migration flows, which can potentially negatively impact even European countries that have already become wary² of the issue (Oneko, 2017). By elucidating the reasons for the protracted survival of Boko Haram, this article may prove useful for further analysis of the impacts on local populations and externalities to foreign lands caused by the power replacement operated by jihadist groups.

This article consists of multiple parts, the first of which draws the line between the concepts of terrorism and insurgency and covers the revolutionary warfare ideas of Maoism and Focoism. The second part is organised to reflect the three theoretically defined operational pillars of revolutionary warfare, with each chapter exploring different aspects of Boko Haram's operations and the final chapter weighing and comparing the relative influence of each of these factors. The third part concludes and summarises the findings of the article.

1. Terrorism, Insurgency, and Key Perspectives of Revolutionary Warfare

Revolutionary warfare is most often, and rightfully so, associated with Marxist groups due to the origin of this concept; however, there has been an increase in contemporary literature linking revolutionary warfare strategy to jihadist groups. To understand this correlation, one must first gain an understanding of what revolutionary warfare is. Academic literature covering Marxist or jihadist nature does not provide a single agreed-upon definition for revolutionary warfare; however, this specific article will be based on the revolutionary warfare definition provided by Craig Whiteside, which is as follows: “Revolutionary warfare is a more specific version of an insurgency, designed to use guerrilla warfare combined with political action to further an ideology in place of the incumbent government” (Whiteside, 2015: 745). Before discussing the aspects of revolutionary warfare, however, one must first discern what makes certain groups seem revolutionary in the first place.

1.1. Boko Haram and the Line between Terrorism and Insurgency

Upon starting the analysis of any type of violent group, several factors have to be addressed. Throughout its existence, the jihadist group of Boko Haram has been labelled both a terrorist organization and an insurgency. In fact, there are many different definitions that describe both terrorism and insurgency, respectively, and over the years, the lines between these two phenomena have started to blur and intercept, possibly due to the growing complexity of contemporary terrorist/insurgent movements. This has resulted in the creation of various definitions for both terrorism and insurgency and in the eyes of scholars such as Walter Laqueur, rendered it impossible to define terrorism (Hoffman, 2017). Nevertheless, examining the two phenomena from a broader perspective helps in pointing out important distinctions.

Generally, terrorism is considered to be the act of undertaking indiscriminate and violent attacks against the population to instil fear and achieve political aims (Johnston, 2018). Overall, these definitions tend to be either rather vague or define terrorism very broadly. For example, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) defines it as “The unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence, instilling fear and terror, against individuals or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, or to gain control over a population, to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives” (NSO, 2021). In essence, most definitions highlight the significance of the factors of

violence and intimidation when discussing terrorist groups. Because of the violent and fear-inspiring ways terrorists aim to achieve their goals, their views may not be largely supported by the population and, therefore, they may find it difficult to attain a following and, as a result, stay afloat in the background of counterterrorism efforts (Johnston, 2018). The overall approach of such a group, naturally, depends on the ideology and the level of violence perceived as acceptable by the group. The aspect of ideology is also closely tied to achieving popular support; therefore, a less violent and more population-centric strategy may go a long way in helping a group sustain its struggle for longer. This sustainable strategy is generally associated with insurgencies, which not only aim to reach political or ideological goals but are often backed up by a more sophisticated approach to achieving power. For instance, the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA's) definition of insurgency states that "insurgency is a protracted political-military activity directed toward completely or partially controlling the resources of a country through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations" (CIA, 2011: 2). The CIA's "Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency" further highlights the diversity of tactics employed by insurgents to increase their own power and diminish that which is possessed by the incumbent state. In essence, while terrorism is often limited in the number of operational instruments it utilises to achieve its aims, an insurgency is often waged through the use of a combination of guerilla military tactics, intelligence gathering, sabotage, propaganda and other operational aspects (Shultz, 2008). In essence, insurgencies often have a larger portfolio of tactics, with each tactic chosen to complement the overall strategy of the group.

Even though the two phenomena of terrorism and insurgency sometimes have intersecting definitions, distinctions can still be made by comparing the overall operational trends of such armed groups. Insurgents oftentimes share features linked to terrorist groups or other guerrilla forces (e.g. favouring kidnappings, assassinations or hit and run tactics); however, the strategy of insurgents surpass other irregular movements through their complexity and the embracement of an approach called 'revolutionary guerilla warfare' or 'people's war' (Hoffman, 2017). In essence, insurgencies often try to develop a form of popular support through "informational (e.g. propaganda) and psychological warfare efforts" (Hoffman, 2017: 37) and oftentimes also attempt to establish parallel administrations to govern occupied areas and to discredit the existing authorities in place of the insurgency. Therefore, it can be claimed that insurgencies are often more complex than terrorist movements in regard to the overall approach to reaching their political and ideological goals. While the strategies of these two phenomena overlap through several features (particularly in the military sphere), distinctions are important to make if one

aims to develop an efficient strategy for combatting either type of movement.

Due to reasons mentioned in the previous section and to maintain a more objective outlook towards Boko Haram, this group will be analysed through the wider variety of features typically associated with an insurgency rather than the more limited amount of features terrorist groups typically possess. It is nevertheless important to mention the fact that (as the empirical part will reveal) Boko Haram, after its split in 2016, now consists of two separate factions that differ significantly in their respective operating strategies. While some may argue that the faction of JAS should be examined strictly as a terrorist group, others will disagree (Montclos, 2014)³, as the faction of ISWAP has shown itself to be a movement more in line with the operating trends of insurgencies. Therefore, to analyse the trends of the Boko Haram movement as a whole and make clear distinctions between its two factions, in this article, the group will be examined through the complicated lens of insurgency.

1.2. The Maoist Approach

This particular strategy of warfare is widely seen the approach formulated by Mao Zedong, as he had a prominent role in the creation of the topic through his book “On Protracted War” and the successful application of his ideas in the Sino–Japanese war of 1937–1945 (Stoddard, 2019). The Maoist approach claims that a protracted war must be conducted through three stages: the *strategic defensive*, the *stalemate*, and the *strategic offensive*. The defensive phase is to be fought in a guerrilla fashion, driving the enemy deep into the countryside and stretching out their supply lines. Once the opposing force’s offensive starts stalling, revolutionaries may start engaging in more equal battles, using captured arms and equipment while remaining highly mobile (Tse-Tung, 1967). This phase would also witness revolutionaries establishing themselves among the common folk, setting up local rulers, promoting civil unrest and collecting taxes. This, in turn, strengthens the movement and provides an opportunity to move onto the final stage – the offensive. The initial strength, morale and momentum of the opponent will be lost and turned against them. In essence, this phased approach to revolutionary warfare came to be because Mao acknowledged the fact that, for a band of insurgents, capturing and holding territory through conventional means would prove too difficult when facing a regular army. Additionally, without capturing said territory, social reforms, the spread of revolutionary ideology and the acquisition of popular support would not succeed. Therefore, a more semi-conventional and phased approach was needed to diminish the strengths of a conventional opponent.

1.3. The Focoist Approach

Another widely discussed approach to revolutionary warfare comes from the Foco theory, which was based upon the experiences of Ernesto “Che” Guevara in the Cuban revolution of 1953–1959. This revolution, however, was different from the aforementioned Sino-Japanese war in its circumstances, and, naturally, the revolutionary ideas of Guevara formed differently in comparison to the approach formulated by Mao. While both commanders were devoted communists who successfully utilised guerrilla principles in battle and stressed the importance of support from the population, several differences can be identified between their ideas presented in books covering warfare (Fonay, 2018). The war that Mao participated in was that of a more gruelling struggle to survive against an invading foreign force in comparison to the Cuban revolution, which was waged rather swiftly against a stumbling, corrupt and weak regime within Cuba. Guevara claimed that a small force of revolutionaries could shape the necessary conditions to bring about a full revolution (Guevara, 1964). By this, he essentially argued that guerrillas might start conducting their operations and create an uprising without the existence of any essential prerequisites. This stands in contrast to the ideas of Mao concerning the necessity for the existence of wider discontent with a regime among the population and the preparedness of the people to rise up (Fonay, 2018). He also emphasised the importance of maintaining a close link to the general peasant population and bringing about land reform policies, not unlike those related to Maoism. However, his overall description of the methods of warfare did not include a detailed and phased approach like that of Mao. Instead of examining it through distinct phases during the insurgency, Guevara argued that the revolutionaries, throughout their struggle, would eventually build up to a critical mass where they could form new columns and face the enemy head-on.

To summarise, these two perspectives on the execution of a revolutionary war share both similarities and differences. The overall goals of achieving power and removing the incumbent government, maintaining popular support and building up from guerrilla actions to conventional military engagements match up. However, due to the different nature of the two conflicts Guevara and Mao participated in, their ideas diverged in several areas. In the end, though, both approaches proved successful in their respective countries of origin and became widely discussed and studied worldwide.

1.4. Jihadist Revolutionary Warfare

As mentioned before, in recent years, there has been an increase in literature covering the links between revolutionary warfare concepts and the strategies of jihadist groups. For example, books and articles from Akali Omeni and Edward Stoddard, among others, provide comparisons between individual practices of Boko Haram or other jihadist groups and Maoist or Focoist thought (Omeni, 2020; Stoddard, 2019; Omeni, 2018; Stoddard, 2020). Crucially, these works oftentimes approach the discussion of revolutionary warfare through three main intertwined features of revolutionary strategy: 1. a revolutionary ideology with the aim to seize territory and establish a new political order; 2. a strategy for building popular support to achieve the aforementioned objective through violent or other means; 3. a military strategy that transitions from low-scale guerilla warfare to more conventional military activity as a means to achieve territory (Stoddard, 2019). These features are all related and are intended to support one another in achieving the final aims of the revolutionaries. There are examples of such tactics being employed in conjunction with one another successfully in the past by both the communist forces of Mao and those of Guevara. Nowadays, the operations of certain jihadist groups tend to share similar features. Crucially, these features are the details that differentiate revolutionary warfare from conventional warfare. Through the combination of ideology, popular support, and gradually increasing military strength, revolutionary forces can have a chance of beating conventional armies.

The ideological pillar of this approach should be considered the basis of a revolutionary movement. While sifting through various literature sources covering the revolutionary goals of insurgents, one may notice that these goals often describe the aim to politically and ideologically transform society. As Stathis N. Kalyvas stated: "A revolutionary group can be defined as a group that aims not just to gain power but self-consciously to transform society in a deep and radical way, by profoundly rearranging social and political relations" (Kalyvas, 2015, as cited in Stoddard, 2019: 304). Naturally, a revolution requires an ideological basis, and insurgent groups with revolutionary goals will have to attain a following to begin their operations. Boko Haram was no different in this regard. As their name suggests, they are opposed to Western education, westernisation and, in their eyes, the historical prosecution of Muslims (Thurston, 2016); therefore, one may also envisage their movement as a rally to arms for marginalised Muslims. In essence, the ideological pillar is mandatory because, without a goal, the struggle would be pointless. Naturally, this leads us to the pillar of popular support. To Mao Zedong, popular support was an essential element of revolution. He created the famous analogy where the

population is like water and the communist guerilla forces – fish, indicating the notion that, to survive, revolutionaries had to depend on the support of the people (Tse-Tung, 1961). Although the Maoist and Focoist schools of revolutionary thought agree that popular support is a crucial factor, they differ in their perspective on the attainment of this support. The Foco theory argues that support can be achieved through violent means and polarization (Guevara, 1964); whereas other revolutionaries following a more Maoist view may find the degree of violence in this approach too high (Stoddard, 2019). Here, a similarity may also be drawn to jihadist groups, as some tend to shy away from the use of indiscriminate violence against fellow Muslims, while others will use terrorism as a means to force the people to obey. While Boko Haram clearly understands the importance of this pillar, its two factions hold differing perspectives on the ways to achieve support, as this article will later point out.

Finally, alongside the attainment of popular support, revolutionaries also need to find a way to procure more arms, land and power, or, in other words, they must correctly execute their military strategy. Omeni argues that similarities can be drawn between the insurgency of Boko Haram and the three phases of the People's War explained by Mao Zedong, namely: the *strategic defensive*, *strategic equilibrium* and *strategic offensive* (Toltica, 2021). References are also being made to the significant role of lower-class people in the insurgency, ideological strength, appeal in the initial phase of the insurgency, and, of course, the use of irregular tactics in an appropriately unstable environment. He further explains how the course of the insurgency seemingly reflected the ideas of Mao: the inferior opponent started its expansion by utilising guerrilla principles, hit-and-run tactics and attention-grabbing attacks, which prompted a harsh, hard power response from the authorities, further destabilising the local environment (Omeni, 2020). It is rather difficult to find a fully matching example of the three stages of war concept being used by contemporary jihadist groups; however, similarities can still be drawn. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that most groups never truly come close to reaching the third stage of Mao's protracted war and oftentimes remain localised struggles.

1.5. Differences in Revolutionary Approaches between Jihadist Factions

While links to revolutionary warfare doctrine can be made, Boko Haram, as a whole, cannot truly be classified as a group abiding by strictly Maoist or post-Maoist principles. Rather, it is a regional jihadist movement relying on both conventional and guerrilla warfare, with the ISWAP faction utilising

a more revolutionary-like strategy in comparison to JAS (Omeni, 2020). In essence, the operating nature of ISWAP reflects Maoist ideas better than that of JAS due to their more population-centric approach. JAS' operational nature (which puts a heavier emphasis on urban terrorism (Udounwa, 2013) is more in line with the Focoist approach of Guevara, which sees military power as a tool of 'armed propaganda' that will foment and build both political and military strength for the insurgency (Wong, 2016).

Additionally, links have been found between Boko Haram and affiliates of Al Qaeda, such as Al-Shabaab, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), who offered training and financial support for the group (Udounwa, 2013). According to researchers such as Professor Kenneth Payne of Kings College in London, Al Qaeda, along with its affiliates, has developed a Focoist strategy for their operations, which can be compared to the ideas promoted by Ernesto 'Che' Guevara (Payne, 2011). Nevertheless, a split in strategies and revolutionary ideas also exists within affiliated jihadist groups. By following the aforementioned framework of revolutionary jihad, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Nathaniel Barr and Bridget Moreng explained that Al Qaeda preferred to stick to a population-centric approach of building popular support and gradually increasing its power without standing out, whereas the Islamic State used its momentum in bold engagements, expanding its reach through the use brute force and later on flaunting its successes (Gartenstein-Ross, Barr, & Moreng, 2016). This, according to the authors, matches up with the differences between Maoism and Focoism. In the case of Boko Haram, both factions compete with each other, and both utilise different approaches to warfare, governance and, finally, both seek to expand differently. However, in the end, we can identify that the strategies of Boko Haram utilise revolutionary warfare aspects that can be linked respectively to both Maoist and Focoist schools of thought.

2. The Operational Nature of Boko Haram

This section is reserved for examining each pillar of the operational nature of Boko Haram, starting with the ideological section, followed by popular support, and ending with the military pillar. Each pillar is comprised of various sub-sections that examine the specific practices of Boko Haram. Before progressing, it is important to acknowledge the split of Boko Haram in 2016, which led to the creation of the factions of JAS and ISWAP. While some news sources (Daily Trust, 2021; PRNigeria, 2021) claim that the two

factions reunited about 1.5 months after the death of JAS' leader, Abubakar Shekau, back in 2021, there is a lack of evidence to suggest that this is truly the case. Instead, it seems that, while a large number of JAS members either surrendered to Nigerian authorities or joined ISWAP, there are still remnants of the faction operating in northeastern parts of Borno state (Husted, 2022). Therefore, in certain sections of each pillar, the distinction between the factions of JAS and ISWAP is made instead of covering Boko Haram as a whole, as they tend to operate in different manners, especially concerning their strategies for attaining popular support.

2.1. Ideological Basis and Operations

The ideology of Boko Haram is quite literally reflected in its name, which translates to "Western education is forbidden". However, the main goal of the movement is not only the removal of westernised education but a complete transformation of Nigeria and its surrounding states into an Islamic caliphate where every aspect of Western influence (that in the eyes of Boko Haram plagues Nigeria) is removed, and people live according to Allah and under Sharia law. This concept is also evident in the original or official name of the group, *Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād*, meaning "the People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad" (Stoddard, 2019). It is important to mention that, in 2002, Boko Haram initially began as a relatively non-violent religious sect that opposed Nigeria's secular ideas and society. It was led by the preacher and proselytiser Muhammed Yusuf, who was viewed by his followers as a prophet. However, as time went on and the sect grew in size, tensions with Nigerian authorities and police continued to rise, eventually culminating in Nigeria suppressing uprisings that had broken out throughout the provinces of Bauchi, Yobe, Borno and Kano. Finally, after the leader of Boko Haram, Yusuf, was detained and extrajudicially killed, the uprising became truly extreme (Walker, 2016). Ever since then, the fight against Boko Haram has seen its ups and downs, with Nigeria struggling to fully quell the movement and having to continue to deal with it to the present day. This, however, begs the question of how a localised sect such as Boko Haram managed to gain such a following and why their devotion to fighting is so strong. By examining the ideological basis of the group, a better understanding of how they set their foundations and what their goals for transforming society are may be reached. An understanding of what the group stands for would further provide reasoning and justification for their actions in the spheres of popular support and military operations.

2.1.1. An Exclusive Ideology against Rival Forms of Islam

Naturally, the group is completely against Christianity and has been violently prosecuting Christians within Nigeria throughout its existence. Aside from that, this Sunni Islamist sect sees its form of Islam as being the only proper and correct one to practice, disregarding all other rival perceptions of Islam as being incorrect and inferior. In fact, Yusuf intended to purify Islam and stated, “We call the Muslim community to correct its creed and its behaviours and its morals... and to give children a correct Islamic education, then to undertake jihad in the way of Allah” (Yusuf, 2008 as cited in Thurston, 2016). Yusuf propagated the concept of *‘al-wala’ wa-l-bara’*, meaning the loyalty to true Muslims and the disavowal of others; loyalty, in the eyes of Yusuf, also means the denunciation of democracy and every other Western idea (Thurston, 2016). Another Islamic principle propagated by Yusuf was *takfir*, meaning the declaration that other Muslims are guilty because they do not follow the main principles of Islam and are, therefore, not true Muslims. Basing himself on such beliefs, Yusuf called for his followers to kill anyone and everyone (including Muslims) who supported Western ideas such as democracy or constitutionalism, essentially enforcing a unified political view upon the population (Thurston, 2016). Although the views of Yusuf and his followers may have been extreme and exclusivist, the group nevertheless managed to enforce its agenda, as anyone brave enough to stand against them risked losing their life. It is questionable whether the group would have managed to attain such a following if it had not strived to reform society in a revolutionary and violent way. Nevertheless, the group’s violent approach simultaneously acted as a double-edged sword: making the name of Boko Haram known while also scaring off a potentially larger and less extreme audience.

2.1.2. Tackling Resistance and Questioning the Legitimacy of Rival Perceptions

The original Boko Haram and its latter faction, JAS, chose to promote and enforce its ideology through intimidation and death threats. The group, instead of enforcing a proper form of governance upon its arrival to new territories, would focus its efforts on destroying rival forms of religion, governance and culture (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2016). The group has gone as far as to kidnap Christians and force them to recite the Quran and convert to Islam at gunpoint (Brock, 2013). Christian women would be taken, and they would be obliged to convert, work for the insurgents and forcibly marry fighters (Brock, 2013). Oftentimes, however, the group would

carry out indiscriminate attacks on settlements without making distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims, shooting people *en masse* and setting entire villages on fire. Additionally, fighters would go from house to house, looking for new recruits, taking young men and reportedly even boys as young as eight (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2016). These young men would then return home brainwashed and intimidated, displaying violent tendencies and even confronting their own families. The group was, therefore, partially successful in forwarding its ideology in affected areas, as their brutal measures would prove effective in ensuring the submission of locals.

Another reason for the ideas of Boko Haram gaining a following is the religious fragmentation of Muslim rule in northeastern Nigeria. This area was under the religious rule of various 'Emirs' that are direct heirs of Muslim authorities from pre-colonial times (Thurston, 2016). These Emirs lost much of their support and were often perceived by the northern people as the chosen by the corrupt government who were not fulfilling their duty of spreading Islam and controlling moral norms (Thurston, 2016). Boko Haram has openly challenged the ideas preached by these local religious leaders on several occasions. Their views are so exclusivist that they have even challenged Muslims falling under the same type of Islam – Salafism. Boko Haram has always been sensitive to criticism concerning its ideology and has oftentimes responded violently to remove religious leaders of opposing views. For example, in May 2014, the group attacked a convoy of Islamic leaders in Borno state, leading to the death of the Emir of Gwoza (France 24, 2014).

2.1.3. The Ideological Divide between the Two Factions

The split of Boko Haram in 2016 brought about not only a military competition for power and resources but also an ideological divergence between the two factions. In fact, as mentioned previously, one of the primary reasons behind the split of Boko Haram was internal disagreements over what practices are acceptable and to what extent violence can be used to achieve religious or ideological goals. From when the split happened until around mid-2018, the two factions maintained their efforts of publicly defending their respective stances on what is justified and Islamic in the correct manner, often pointing out the 'misaligned' views of their rival faction (ICG, 2019). From this information, one can see that the two factions have not only been competing militarily but have also been fighting an informational war.

The primary ideological disparities between JAS and ISWAP come in the form of specific Islamic principles, namely the aforementioned *takfir* and *al-wala' wa-l-bara*. In essence, JAS held a far more strict perception of these

principles, choosing to accuse or target even Muslims who did not (in JAS's eyes) follow them correctly. This indiscriminate targeting of Muslims living outside JAS territory and the overall brutality of JAS's attacks witnessed criticism from ISWAP numerous times, with the latter faction calling out JAS for being too brutal and "in violation of Islamic doctrine" (ICG, 2019: 7). ISWAP additionally tried to portray itself as the better faction by pointing out leadership issues within JAS, the supposed incompetence of their leader Shekau, and alleged secretive assassinations carried out on commanders willing to disagree with the tyrannical leader of JAS (ICG, 2019). The difference in the levels of violence between the factions has also been actively pointed out by ISWAP in their propaganda messages and videos, which try to portray the faction as the overall better option for Muslim civilians (Stoddard, 2019). These back-and-forth accusations between JAS and ISWAP continually hinted at the supposed divergence from authentic Salafist ideas. Nevertheless, one cannot judge statements coming from either faction to be completely reliable, as they are, after all, propaganda.

In essence, we can gather that while both factions of Boko Haram base themselves upon Salafist Sunni Islam, they differ in their perceptions of certain ideas stemming from this ideology. In terms of spreading this ideology and carrying out *dawa* (preaching the ideas of their prophet and Islam), ISWAP may have gained the upper hand over JAS through their more tolerant views towards regular Muslim civilians and, in addition, pursued an approach of inspiring or guiding people instead of forcing them into submission.

2.2. Successes and Failures in Building Popular Support

The vision of a caliphate and military prowess are not sufficient enough to establish a state. It needs to be governed in some form and offer locals the basic needs they are entitled to, such as education, jobs, security, and so on. While these may only be established in the long term, citizens might lose interest and migrate elsewhere if their new, parallel state run by insurgents performs more poorly than the previous authorities (Ladbury et al., 2016).

The importance of the aspect of popular support was always emphasized by both the Maoist and Focoist parties of revolutionary thought. Both saw the population as an indispensable part of an insurgency, upon which relies the outcome of the revolution. As previously mentioned, Mao Zedong emphasized the importance of maintaining popular support through reform, protection, and mutual support. Che Guevara, however, believed that one might get the population on their side through a cruder approach that involves (if necessary)

intimidation and polarisation of the people. Here, a similar contrast could be made between the ideas of Mao and the approach of ISWAP on the one hand and the ideas of Guevara and the approach of the JAS faction on the other. Initially, the leadership of Boko Haram, unlike a large part of its members, saw polarising acts and terrorist attacks against the population as an acceptable way of attaining support. This approach, however, can also be identified as one of the reasons behind the schism of the group back in 2016 (EUAA, 2021). From this, it can be determined that ISWAP may be viewed as the more favourable faction in the eyes of the people. Considering the fact that Boko Haram split primarily because of their disagreements over the attainment of popular support and the morality of their attacks, the relative importance of this pillar will differ for the two factions.

As Stoddard argues, the primary difference between these two factions is the way they choose to interact with the overall Muslim population (Stoddard, 2019) and their differing perceptions of the principle of *takfir*. JAS has an overall more exclusivist and strict perception of how Islam can and should be practised and will defend this perception through any means it deems necessary, including the indiscriminate killing of fellow Muslims. Therefore, by examining the social dynamics and governance trends of each faction, one may develop a better understanding of how they succeeded or failed in bolstering this pillar to prolong their survival.

2.2.1. Governance under Boko Haram

Back in the day, Boko Haram, under the leadership of Yusuf, had already started its state-building process, establishing a community tied together by intersecting religious and political interests. Yusuf had reportedly already designed the framework for political rule, with a supreme council, a cabinet, and other necessary institutions (Walker, 2012). Signs of a social welfare system also began to appear, with Yusuf creating policies for the distribution of food to refugees, financing special events, and giving out small loans for starting businesses (Ladbury et al., 2016). However, upon the death of Yusuf, and with Shekau taking his place, there was little hope of the group expanding or improving its governance policies. Boko Haram instead turned to terror and basic policies for policing and sentencing (Ladbury et al., 2016). Boko Haram would reportedly hand out leaflets with a set of strict rules to follow, upon breaking, which people would face various punishments ranging from lashing to lapidation (Ladbury et al., 2016). This trend would later carry on with the JAS faction post-split, as Shekau did not seem to be interested in crafting a proper governance structure in occupied communities. Therefore,

beyond appointing Emirs and setting basic rules, JAS did not and does not provide much to the communities it occupies.

In contrast, as Stoddard has pointed out, the faction of ISWAP has always taken a more calculated and supportive approach when dealing with the population (Stoddard, 2019). As mentioned before, the split of Boko Haram in 2016 can largely be attributed to the disagreements over governance and the treatment of civilians. In fact, in 2018, the leader of ISWAP, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, criticized the reckless approach of Shekau in the book “Cutting Out the Tumor”. Al-Barnawi argues that a Muslim should not be accused of *takfir* just because of his unwillingness to join or follow the views of Boko Haram and further acknowledges the fact that membership in Boko Haram can make the individual a target for COIN forces (Stoddard, 2019). The criticism al-Barnawi later puts forth really shows the difference in perspective between the two factions. Al-Barnawi, while not exactly a source that researchers should base themselves upon, makes some points that are worth looking into. Particularly, he states that Shekau, during his rule of the caliphate, “sowed corruption and ruined the cultivation and animals”, referring to the incompetent control and lack of governance during this time (Stoddard, 2019: 311). What is more, researchers have pointed out that, unlike JAS with its approach of polarizing people into submission, ISWAP tends to actually help populations under their control by offering protection from JAS or state COIN forces (Berlingozzi, 2020). In fact, ever since the two factions split, there has been infighting between them not only ideologically but also militarily. There are supposed accounts of ISWAP fighting JAS in the south of Niger in order to “rescue kidnapped women and stolen livestock” (Berlingozzi, 2020: 42). Further solidifying the image of ISWAP were first-hand accounts from people who have fled the conflict areas, who stated that they had been getting contacted by their friends from Baga, inviting them to return to the village controlled by ISWAP (Stoddard, 2019). They were supposedly told that “provided they pay their taxes, ISWAP lets them go about their business” (Stoddard, 2019: 314). From all these accounts, we can make out that ISWAP was successful in portraying itself as the more lenient and friendly alternative to JAS. The faction not only preached about its popular approach in propaganda but actually carried it over into practice, arguably making ISWAP stronger in the pillar of popular support and contributing to their overall protracted survival through new recruits and collaborators.

Overall, the two factions of Boko Haram differ in their approaches to controlling the population. Where JAS likes to indoctrinate people in a crude and violent way, not showing much attention to their well-being, ISWAP seems to be trying to win the hearts and minds of the population by occasionally helping

them out. Nevertheless, we cannot claim that ISWAP is an altruistic group, as they are clearly a radical jihadist organization that causes harm, just through a different approach. However, to the marginalized Muslim community of the north, the governance and partial protection provided by ISWAP often seems to be a better option than the interrogations for collaborating with jihadists and the disregard for well-being they might face under the control of the Nigerian state. Therefore, successful governance on behalf of ISWAP can be attributed to the prolonged survival of the group.

2.2.2. Taxation and Gender Dynamics

The split between ISWAP and JAS can also be noticed in the ways they sustain their insurgencies. ISWAP, in order to remain less intrusive and look more favourable, refrained from stealing goods and animals and restricting the movement of herders, instead choosing to collect taxes from the people (Berlingozzi, 2020). JAS, on the other hand, chooses to loot and pillage villages for resources in addition to their infamous tactics of kidnapping for ransom, which is, unsurprisingly, not perceived well by locals (Berlingozzi, 2020). Nevertheless, what is initially perceived cannot always be taken as a fact, and the same stands for ISWAP's tax collection methods. While it may seem that the majority of people are fine with paying taxes, there have been reports of ISWAP killing traders who were unwilling to pay up (Mahmood & Ani, 2018). There have also reportedly been instances of ISWAP outright ordering people to leave their homes, fearful of locals being spies (Dodds & Anyadike, 2023). Nevertheless, in the eyes of the general population, ISWAP will still be perceived as less harmful than JAS. It also seems that ISWAP overall has a more resilient source of financing than JAS, as al-Barnawi's faction has infiltrated the economy of the Lake Chad basin in a way, cementing their hold on profit coming from resource trade. Trades of fishing (especially important for inhabitants near Lake Chad) and peppers are thought to be taxed by ISWAP (Mahmood & Ani, 2018). Gaining control of local markets was indeed a wise decision by ISWAP, as not only does it cement their presence economically, but it also creates a consistent trading environment for the locals, which the military would likely not bother setting up (Mahmood & Ani, 2018). The role of financing in shaping the survivability of a jihadist group is, of course, self-explanatory, and ISWAP seems to have taken the right path in creating a taxation system for their benefit. JAS, on the other hand, did not bother establishing these clear-cut systems, choosing instead to rely on looting, which, in the long term, is not a favourable strategy.

Another important point of discussion is the role of women within Boko

Haram. Due to the group being a radical jihadist organization, many may assume that the rights of women are severely restricted. This, however, does not always seem to be the case. Naturally, the fates of Christian women within Boko Haram's territory are often fatal, especially if they do not accept the idea of converting to Islam. However, continuing the trend of a more population-centric approach, ISWAP does not restrict Muslim women as much as JAS does. Instead of being used for satisfying the needs of fighters or doing hard labour, women are often used as recruiters, moving freely within ISWAP-controlled territory and venturing into internally displaced person (IDP) camps to gather recruits (Berlingozzi, 2020). Additionally, in more rural areas, women often benefit from the insurgency through the education of children, providing logistical support by cooking or through other supporting tasks (Berlingozzi, 2020). Women are also reportedly less likely to expose the membership of their family in the insurgency to the authorities, as they would be stigmatized by locals (Berlingozzi, 2020). When it comes to giving combat roles to women, however, JAS is the faction to look at. JAS has been employing women to carry out suicide bombings throughout the existence of the group, whereas the idea of women being used for suicide bombings involuntarily was outright rejected by ISWAP upon their split from Boko Haram (Pearson & Zenn, 2021). JAS had also reportedly had arguments with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)⁴ about this issue, with the IS claiming this tactic to be unacceptable and only meant to be used in last-resort situations (Foucher, 2020). Therefore, we can check off another aspect of popular support where ISWAP is more successful than JAS. The role of women is an often overlooked or less fruitful aspect in the case of jihadist groups. However, in this insurgency, it seems that women had found a suitable place in the supporting role, especially in the case of ISWAP.

While there isn't enough ground to claim that Boko Haram perfectly mirrors revolutionary groups through their successes in building popular support, comparisons can still be drawn. The faction of ISWAP, since its inception, has provided a more lenient, less brutal and somewhat more helpful alternative to regular people in comparison to JAS. ISWAP, especially in its early stages, avoided targeting innocent Muslim civilians and pillaging at random in fear of building a bad image for itself. This faction, unlike JAS, actually put some effort into setting up local administrations, appointing leaders, creating a protection and taxation system, and even going as far as to address the issue of gender dynamics to some extent. Therefore, we can claim that ISWAP was the overall more people-centric faction in comparison to JAS, with more sustainable long-term approaches to controlling people and resource flows, which likely contributed to their protracted survival.

2.3. The Military Pillar

The expansion of Boko Haram could not have been achieved solely through the spread of ideology and popular support; naturally, it required military action. While not a conventional standing army, as time went on - Boko Haram mustered up enough manpower and equipment to become capable of occasionally challenging the conventional military forces of Nigeria and its surrounding countries through larger-scale offensives. The offensive phase of Boko Haram's operations took place between the years 2011 to 2015, when the scope and number of attacks drastically increased. Between 2014 and 2015, in particular, the group caused over 20,000 deaths and controlled an amount of territory that was roughly equal to the size of Belgium (Allen, 2019). This was especially impressive considering that Boko Haram ended up taking the title of the deadliest terrorist group in the world in 2015. The group managed to seemingly overwhelm Nigerian authorities through its many uprisings and attacks, with its leader even proclaiming the establishment of a caliphate.

This, however, was not meant to be, and the group lost the vast majority of its seized territory within five months after a large-scale crackdown ensued. With this change in the tides of war, the nature of Boko Haram's militant operations eventually shifted from aiming to achieve territory through motorized infantry forces to conducting more covert operations in a guerilla fashion, such as suicide bombings, plantings of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and infiltration operations (Omeni, 2019). This change in tactics brought the MNJTF and the Nigerian army new difficulties in facing the group. As Omeni argues, Boko Haram "operates on two fronts" – the overt (its standing army) and the covert (guerilla warfare) (Omeni, 2019). Whenever the group feels the need to – it can switch from one approach to another or utilise them simultaneously, further complicating COIN operations (Omeni, 2019). The Boko Haram insurgency, being a localised rather than a global movement, comes with its own nuances. Due to their limitations in strength in comparison to local military forces, the group has chosen to keep itself relevant through low-intensity and irregular conflict, which only escalated to offensive and territory-seeking phases for brief periods of time. Therefore, by looking at the military equipment, organisation and tactics of Boko Haram, a better understanding of their protracted survival may be achieved.

2.3.1. Acquisition of Materiel

To be able to fight, an insurgent group must first procure arms and equipment from somewhere. Boko Haram has reportedly been receiving arms

from conflict zones through the black market and may also have acquired a part of its arsenal through the help of corrupt soldiers and local craftsmen (Berman, 2021). Rather surprising is the fact that Boko Haram also seems to have limited expertise in producing and improvising arms and munitions, even making innovations in some areas (Omeni, 2017). However, according to the force commander of the MNJTF, Maj-Gen Lo Adeosun, most of the weapons obtained by the group come from the military positions that Boko Haram attacked (Besheer, 2017). Reports from Conflict Armament Research (CAR) and the International Peace Information Service (IPIS) suggest that Boko Haram had acquired a lot of weapons from abandoned state stockpiles, maintaining control of which may have been a difficult task for active counterinsurgency forces during operations (Dzirutwe, 2022). In fact, this was not a one-time incident, and the group has been acquiring arms and equipment formerly owned by government forces for nearly a decade. This should be a worrying prospect for security forces, as the weapons they once used to fight the insurgency can now be used against them. Nevertheless, over 500 incidents from January 2015 to April 2021 have been reported in a Data Set of the Safeguarding Security Sector Stockpiles (S⁴) Initiative that measures losses in equipment caused by both factions of Boko Haram (Berman, 2021), with around 100 of the attacks being described as ‘significant’⁵ in terms of equipment loss.

Table 1. **Categories of “Significant” Losses of Materiel from Security Sector Stockpiles**

Category	Quantities of Type of Materiel Diverted				
	Weapons		Rounds of Ammunition		Technicals (or armoured vehicles)
Category 1	10 –49	or	1,000 - 9,999	or	1–4
Category 2	50 –99	or	10,000 - 99,999	or	5 – 9
Category 3	100+	or	100,000+	or	10+

Source: (Berman, 2021: 16)

For example, on February 21, 2021, alone, there were three category 3 events in Borno state, Nigeria, where, during their attack, ISWAP insurgents seized military equipment and vehicles. Insurgents from the ISWAP faction, arriving in dozens of trucks and previously captured Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, attacked army camps in Dikwa, Marte and Mainok, resulting in the destruction and capture of even more equipment. More impressive is the fact that the aforementioned camps were actually the so-called ‘Super Camps’, which are supposed to be stronger than previously deployed forward operating bases. This shows both the existence of coordination and

armed capabilities from the insurgents as well as a lack of preparedness from the Nigerian armed forces.

As evidence suggests, Boko Haram has been successfully capturing small arms and light weapons (SALW), heavy weaponry (e.g. mortars, artillery systems), munitions and even military-grade vehicles such as tanks from the MNJTF; therefore, the group was able to keep operating for long periods of time without much need for external support (Berman, 2021). Continual unexpected attacks from Boko Haram have consistently caused state forces of Nigeria and forces of the MNJTF to lose equipment and add to the strength of the insurgency. Upon building up enough strength and resources, Boko Haram is able to undertake even bigger attacks that have more of their captured vehicles and equipment at stake. The repercussions of these losses should not be understated, as these events can lead to a *snowball effect*, making the standing army of Boko Haram stronger and more capable of facing state security actors head-on.

2.3.2. Organization and Capabilities

The overall size of Boko Haram is debated, and over the years, the number of members in each faction of the group has fluctuated. However, according to 2020 estimates from the US Department of Defense, the faction of ISWAP at the time had around 3,500 to 5,000 members, whereas JAS was estimated to be around 1,500–2,000 members strong (Husted, 2021). However, the group's membership has continually fluctuated, with the JAS faction in particular suffering heavy losses after engaging with both its competing faction and government troops simultaneously. Despite the big drop in membership in the JAS faction and the motivational blow they sustained after the death of Shekau, one cannot truly estimate their exact manpower size or the morale of their insurgents. What can be said for certain, however, and as many other analyses have shown, is that the ISWAP faction is larger in terms of its membership and likely a much healthier insurgency overall, having claimed the title of the more dangerous faction long ago. Disregarding the larger decentralisation and the comparatively rougher conditions, JAS is not to be underestimated, as these foot soldiers are mostly military-aged males who have undergone basic infantry or, in some cases, specialised training organised by the group (Omeni, 2019). In fact, as photos, videos and live witness accounts have shown, Boko Haram is not just a simple ragtag band of militants but a relatively well-organised fighting force.

In terms of basic equipment, the rifle most used by the insurgents is the AK-47, in some cases, complemented by a bandolier; however, some

of its members have been spotted carrying weapons as basic as sticks and machetes, suggesting that the ratio of their men is higher in comparison to equipment (Omeni, 2019). Since the main opponent of Boko Haram on the battlefield is the Nigerian army, the majority of its weapons and vehicles are captured from them, as stated earlier. Typically, sections of Boko Haram carry specialised weapons like machine guns and grenade launchers such as the RPG-7, which are further supported on platoon level by either improvised technicals, such as the Toyota Hilux with mounted machine guns or other lightly armoured infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) (Omeni, 2019). In rare cases, the group has reportedly brought more sophisticated vehicles, such as captured tanks and more modern armoured personnel carriers (APCs), to battle (Army Recognition, 2014). Nevertheless, the armoured capabilities of the group are certainly limited, and while they do like to flaunt these vehicles in their propaganda, they are much less common on the actual battlefield⁶. Therefore, while the group certainly prefers to have mobility in its offensives, it is rarely backed up by heavier equipment such as tanks or artillery.

Table 2. **Heavy Weapons Systems Seized by Boko Haram and ISWAP since 2015**

Weapon Type	Model	Weapon Type	Model
AFV	AML 60 Serval	IMV	Spartan Mk III
AFV	ERC 90 Sagaie	Light Tank	BMP-1
APC	4K 4FA	Light Tank	FV 101 Scorpi-on
APC	BTR-4	MBT	Mk 3 Eagle
APC	FV103 Spartan	MET	T-55
APC	MT-LB	MLRS	Type 85
APC	Piranha	MRAP	CS/VP3
APC	ZSL-92A	MRAP	Legion
Gun Truck	IVM G12	MRAP	Reva
IMV	Cobra	SPA	BM-21 Grad
IMV	KLTV	Towed Artillery	D-30
IMV	Phantom II	Towed Artillery	Mod-56
Key:			
▪ AFV:	Armored Fighting Vehicle		
▪ APC:	Armored Personnel Carrier		
▪ IMV:	Infantry Mobility Vehicle		
▪ MBT:	Main Battle Tank		
▪ MLRS:	Multiple Launch Rocket System		
▪ MAAR	Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected (vehicle)		
▪ SPA:	Self-propelled Artillery		

Source: (Berman, 2022)

The backbone of Boko Haram's standing army is, in fact, motorized infantry that relies primarily on improvised technicals, such as trucks, 4x4s, and other transporters with heavier machine guns bolted on for additional firepower (Omeni, 2019). This may sound rather crude, but this type of vehicle has also seen quite a lot of use from insurgents in other conflict areas such as Syria or Libya (Latorraca, 2014). Boko Haram has been successfully utilising these vehicles in its raids and attacks, especially since 2014, when it started to openly engage company and battalion-sized units (Omeni, 2019). Even nowadays, with the faction of JAS weakened and operating primarily in and around the Sambisa Forest, their vehicles remain a useful asset. They may no longer be supporting the overt front; however, now, with JAS primarily utilising guerrilla and mobile warfare tactics, they have certainly found their mobile assets to be useful in hasty retreats.

Overall, it can be stated that while Boko Haram retains a level of organisation militarily, they tend to utilise whatever equipment they have at their disposal. While it would not be fair to compare them to a regular army, such as that of Nigeria, Boko Haram has proven to be a formidable opponent despite their significantly smaller troop count and fragmented organisation. The group has also shown itself as a resourceful and inventive opponent, utilising improvised technicals to carry out attacks while remaining mobile. Therefore, it can be assumed that the limited, but nevertheless existent organisation and armament of Boko Haram make it formidable enough as a threat to occasionally challenge conventional forces and contribute directly to their protracted survival.

2.3.3. Military Tactics

Government officials of Nigeria and other Lake Chad basin countries might claim that Boko Haram has been significantly weakened or technically defeated, but evidence seems to suggest that over the years, this insurgency has grown to become much more sophisticated and began utilising tactics that local COIN forces were not prepared to deal with. The use of guerrilla tactics is usually associated with a weaker fighting force numerically and logistically, and while this is the case with Boko Haram, a shift to guerrilla tactics can also be advantageous to the group (Omeni, 2020). Forces that pursue a guerrilla strategy have proven throughout history to be tough adversaries (Asprey, 2022). As Omeni argued, Boko Haram is still strong through its ability to interchangeably operate both on the overt and the covert front, with the latter functioning as a war-avoiding psychological weapon to prove that the insurgency is still a threat (Omeni, 2020). Therefore,

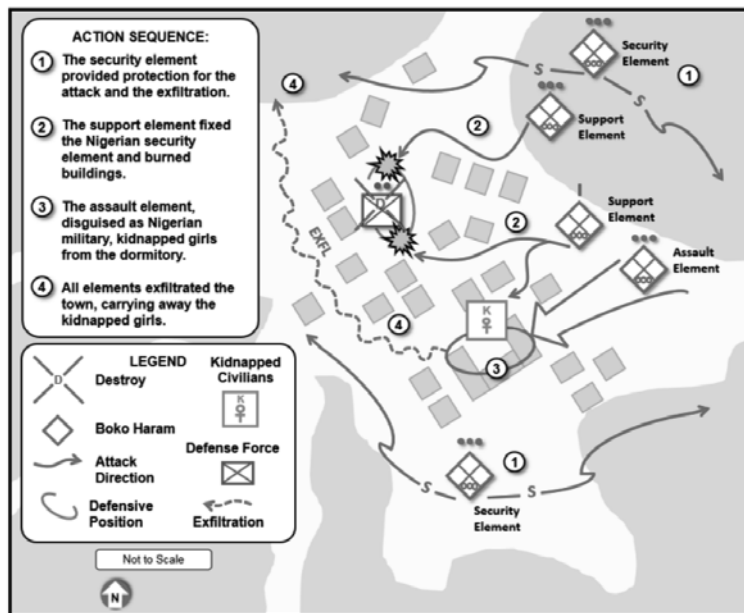
the key to uncovering the answer to why the insurgency of Boko Haram has been present for so long might lie in analysing its military patterns and discussing its tactics. Through a deeper look into the operational portfolio of these jihadist insurgents, one may develop a better understanding of their continued resilience.

2.3.3.1. Conventional Tactics

Concerning more conventional military tactics, Boko Haram has predominantly preferred to be offensive through short raids and ambushes against weaker targets. The overall goals of these attacks are to intimidate civilians, disrupt COIN efforts, capture resources for the group and create mistrust towards the government among the population (Burns, 2015). The group has rarely been successful in maintaining control of captured territories; therefore, it chose to utilise military tactics that inflict damage on the security forces without the need to maintain the fight for a prolonged period.

To name an example of these tactics, Boko Haram often conduct raids on villages, where they pillage resources, kidnap people, take hostages and destroy infrastructure (Burns, 2015). This brutal tactic is particularly embraced by the JAS faction, which has always sought to polarise non-compliant people into submission. For example, on January 8, 2021, Boko Haram fighters raided the town of Mozogo, Cameroon, where they broke into houses, stole property and murdered innocent residents. Those who tried to flee were caught up to by a suicide bomber (HRW, 2021). In cases where certain towns or villages were defended by an army contingent, Boko Haram still managed to succeed due to the fact that these raids were often thoroughly planned and executed in a way that is not unlike how a regular military unit would conduct such operations. For instance, Boko Haram also chooses to use a supporting element to fixate on the opponent, while the assault element moves closer to achieve the objective (Burns, 2015). Finally, the exfiltration of the assault element is also covered by a supporting element to retreat after the operation. The size of the attacking unit is deliberately chosen to be greater than the defending security forces to guarantee success.

Figure 1. A Schematic Representation of the Raid on Chibok Girls Secondary School



Source: (Burns, 2015: 6)

Another tactic widely favoured by Boko Haram, especially during its territorial expansion in 2015, was the assault. This type of operation, being an instrument for territory seeking aims, is meant to destroy the opponent using firepower and to occupy their former position. One of the most notable examples of Boko Haram using this tactic is the assault on Baga, during which the insurgents were temporarily repelled but nevertheless succeeded in occupying the village. To reach Baga, Boko Haram first had to deal with an MNJTF base located in the southwest of the village. This did not prove too difficult for the group, as they approached the understaffed base well-armed and in large numbers (BBC, 2015). In fact, as will be highlighted later in this article, these timed attacks were likely not a pure coincidence but instead a result of Boko Haram's effective intelligence-gathering capabilities. After flanking and pushing out the defenders, the insurgents attempted to mount an attack on Baga itself, which was repelled by local Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) troops and the besieged security personnel; however, after a short reorganisation, Boko Haram was able to attack and breach the defensive, leading to uncontrolled pillaging and killing of the village people (Burns, 2015). Satellite imagery later reportedly showed that over 3,700 buildings in Baga and around 3,100 in the nearby village of Doron Baga were destroyed,

and human bodies were left scattered everywhere (the exact number of casualties was unknown) (Amnesty International, 2018). The capture of Baga and the subsequent mass loss of innocent lives showed Nigeria and its allies that Boko Haram was more than simply a small band of militants who flaunt their prowess but fail to deliver. The loss of Baga could also have been perceived as a strategic loss for Nigeria and the MNJTF, considering its proximity to Lake Chad, the former headquarters of the MNJTF and the fair amount of resistance it put up.

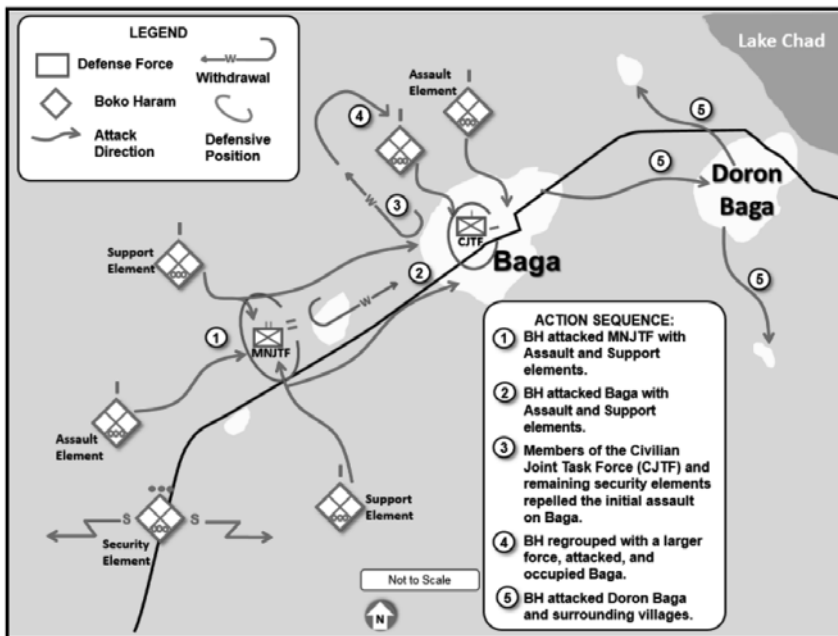


Figure 2. A Schematic Representation of the Assault on Baga

Source: (Burns, 2015: 7)

The assault of this village and the swift takeover of surrounding settlements proved that Nigeria and the MNJTF suffered from poor communication, intelligence gathering capabilities and a lack of security personnel on the ground in certain key areas. Boko Haram was able to take advantage of this.

Another less territory-seeking but nevertheless impactful tactic frequently used by insurgents is the ambush. Ambushes have always been a staple tactic of guerrilla forces since the time and place to execute such an attack can be chosen by the ambushing force. Boko Haram has employed this tactic several times to disrupt or block the movement of troops, deny certain areas

of approach or kill personnel and capture supplies (Burns, 2015). If executed properly, an ambush can lead to heavy losses for the opposing force and make it reconsider sending military convoys through particular areas. For example, on 23 March 2020, Boko Haram conducted an ambush on Nigerian troops near the village of Goneri, which caused the deaths of at least 50 Nigerian soldiers (Al Jazeera, 2020). According to several news reports, the group armed with support weapons and RPGs hit a Multi Barrel Rocket Launcher (MBRL) and a Sinotruck that was full of soldiers, resulting in an entire "artillery unit of the Nigerian army being wiped out" (Haruna, 2020). Such ambushes are not only hard to predict and entail significant casualties to security personnel, but they also have the potential to function as a psychological weapon. Nigerian security forces going out on patrol can often be demoralised when facing insurgents in such conditions and have to put up with stress in the background of frequent ambushes. There have even been reports of soldiers revolting against their commanding officers after seeing their dead comrades, leading to court martialling and death sentencing (The Guardian, 2014). The fact that ambushes can result in such damage and create waves of distrust, demoralisation, and even mutiny among troops clearly shows its effectiveness as a tactic for Boko Haram. This relatively low-risk and hard-to-predict tactic is, therefore, not only useful for area denial but also functions as a demoralising tool against Nigerian troops.

Putting offensive operations aside, Boko Haram has often found itself incapable of permanently holding territory. While the group does possess a healthy amount of captured arms in comparison to some military outposts of their adversaries, in the broader picture, Boko Haram is not capable of facing the far larger and more professionally trained Nigerian armed forces for long periods of time (Burns, 2015). Upon direct confrontation with a significant Nigerian army contingent, the group frequently retreats and settles in comparatively safer zones to reorganise. Therefore, due to the lack of efficiency in Boko Haram's defensive operations, this aspect will not be further elaborated upon in this article.

2.3.3.2. *Unconventional Tactics*

As for less conventional tactics, or as Omeni described it, 'Boko Haram's covert front' (Omeni, 2018), the group tends to carry out a variety of attacks in which civilians are oftentimes the primary target. Indiscriminate bombings, kidnappings, or assassinations are particularly common practices for the JAS faction that prefers to stay relevant through polarization and *takfir*. Such attacks are much harder to predict and counter, especially in an

environment where insurgents manage to blend into the population. The martyrdom operations of Boko Haram “lend war avoidance a new meaning” (Omeni, 2018: 11), and in the eyes of the public, they disprove the idea of the dominance of the Nigerian military forces, as suicide attacks are not conventional military engagements.

One of the aspects of Boko Haram’s covert operations is suicide bombings and the use of IEDs. These attacks are not necessarily too fruitful for the group, as it achieves comparatively fewer casualties through its suicide attacks in comparison to other jihadist groups (reaching an average of 8,1 people killed per attack in 2014 and further declining to only 0,8 in 2017 according to a report from the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC); nor do these attacks represent a big part of the group’s violence (only accounting for around 15% of Boko Haram’s attacks) (Warner & Matfess, 2017). Nevertheless, in comparison to other African insurgencies, Boko Haram conducted suicide bombings far more frequently and did not necessarily only target large groups of people (Warner & Matfess, 2017). As data (displayed in figure 3) collected by the CTC shows, the primary targets of suicide bombings are Government targets, closely followed by markets. Despite the group’s evidently extreme stance against everything Western and Christian, their attacks are not primarily directed against religious or educational institutions; instead, Boko Haram primarily focuses on innocent civilian targets that are seemingly often unrelated to their strategic goals (Warner & Matfess, 2017). It is also important, however, to make the distinction between JAS and ISWAP, as the latter prefers to attack primarily military targets, whereas JAS has been the perpetrator of most attacks against civilians. Therefore, we can deduce that ISWAP aims to affect the state and its military forces more in particular, whereas JAS uses such attacks to create chaos among the people and disorganisation, leading to a more unstable environment, where they may swoop in and pretend to enforce order.

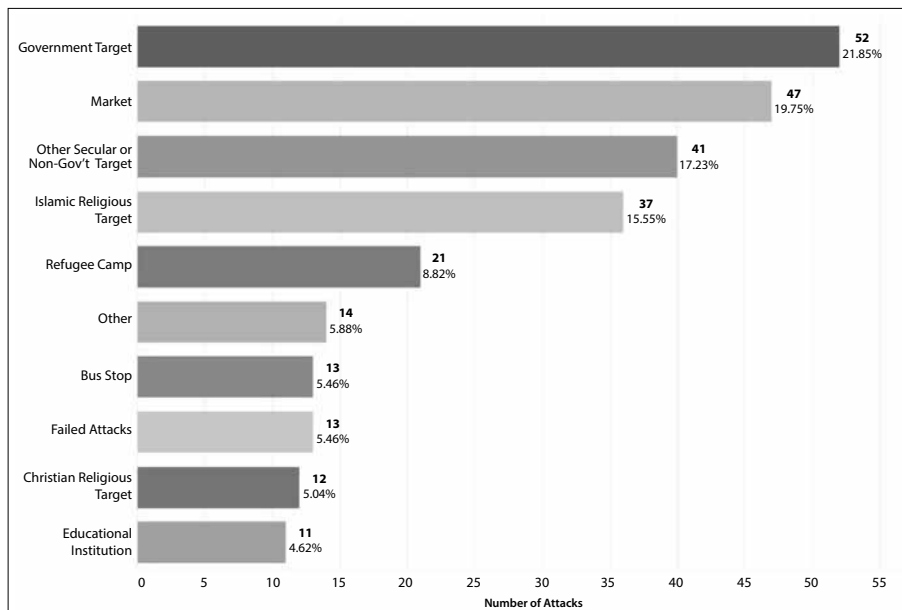


Figure 3. Boko Haram's Suicide Bombing Count by Target (2011-2017)

Source: (Warner & Matfess, 2017: 16)

Another infamous tactic Boko Haram uses to gain leverage and instill fear is kidnapping. Naturally, without any support from official state actors, the group has had to find a way to diversify its sources of income. This is where ransoms from kidnappings come into play. Boko Haram initially started kidnapping people back in 2011–2012 in retaliation to the Nigerian government detaining over 100 family members of Boko Haram fighters, including those of Shekau (Burns, 2015). While kidnapping people provides Boko Haram with slaves for labour and additionally causes larger dissatisfaction with the government among the population, kidnappings can and have also been used as a steady source of income by the group (Burns, 2015). In fact, kidnapping has become a widely used tactic by Boko Haram due to its profitability. In 2013 and 2014, Boko Haram reportedly obtained several millions of dollars through ransoms from four kidnapping incidents in northern Cameroon (CTC, 2018). Some estimates show that the kidnapping of the family members of wealthy Nigerians may earn the group up to \$1 million per incident (CTC, 2018). This tactic has allowed the group to even force state governments to make concessions or pay ransoms. However, from these incidents, one particular Boko Haram kidnapping attracted the attention of news outlets and government officials from all over the world. The kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from the secondary school in Chibok created a media outrage and sparked the 'Bring Back Our

Girls' movement (BBC, 2017). It is also important to mention that Boko Haram did not attempt to conceal their plan to raid Chibok, and while the Nigerian military reportedly had intelligence about the incoming attack, they did not send reinforcements, leaving the village vulnerable and underdefended (Burns, 2015). This attack also functioned as a great propaganda victory for Boko Haram, as the group received large media coverage as they began their massive territorial conquests and further increased public discontent with the Nigerian government.

Infiltration and deception operations have also been used by Boko Haram to exploit the hope of civilians of receiving aid from authorities. Usually, prior to attacks, the group would attempt to infiltrate some of its members inside a village, acting like ordinary folk, religious leaders, or regular military personnel (Burns, 2015). After numerous requests to send troops for protection of the people from the village of Izghe in Borno state on 14 February, 2014, Boko Haram fighters disguised as Nigerian military troops (dressed in uniform, armed, and driving similar technicals) showed up to the village, gathered up the unsuspecting people and massacred at least 106 of them (Associated Press, 2014). The same deception technique was used in the aforementioned Chibok kidnapping, where insurgents disguised as soldiers persuaded the schoolgirls to come with them by saying they were there "to protect [them] all" (Associated Press, 2014). Members of the group have also reportedly pretended to be traders, religious preachers and even women by wearing clothing stolen from the locals to get in close enough proximity to the people, gain their trust and later strike (Burns, 2015). The existence of such tactics holds a worrying prospect for both innocent civilians and COIN forces alike, as you might never notice your enemy before it's too late. Guerrilla fighters have always emphasised the importance of maintaining links with the people and blending into the population, and insurgents from groups like Boko Haram seem to also understand this principle. Villages that are in close proximity to, or had been absorbed into the sphere of influence of Boko Haram might still hide insurgents roaming the streets in disguise, posing a very real threat to both locals and security forces alike.

In conclusion, it may be asserted that Boko Haram was presented with the opportunity to adapt new tactics and draw lessons from its numerous encounters with Nigerian security forces and the MNJTF over the course of its many years of operations. While the group has had its ups and downs and, in its current state, is not capable of controlling vast swathes of territory as it did in 2015, it has, nevertheless, matured as an insurgency. From classic, military-style offensive operations to less conventional covert and guerrilla tactics, the group has shown the world that it is capable of surviving through the help of

its rich portfolio of tactics. The covert aspect of the operations of Boko Haram seems to be of particular importance as of late due to the larger pressure it has been receiving from COIN operations. The ability of Boko Haram to blend into the population, their constant use of IEDs in bombings, and their practices of intimidation have all played a part in destabilising the environment of the Lake Chad basin. Finally, the group's capacity to transition between conventional and non-conventional tactics has made it into a sophisticated insurgency that continues to cause unacceptable amounts of damage and that local security forces have yet to find a way to address.

2.4. The Relative Importance of Each Pillar to the Survivability of Boko Haram

In order to weigh the comparative importance of different factors in shaping Boko Haram's survival, the two opposing factions of the group must be addressed separately. Due to their different strategies, particularly in the pillars of popular support and ideology, the factions reached varying levels of success.

As mentioned previously, JAS pursues an ideology that it deems to be the only correct form of Islam, making it a particularly exclusivist movement. This exclusivism may also be making it harder for JAS to recruit new members, as not all Muslims will find the ideas of the group acceptable. Indeed, because of its strict perception of Islam, JAS has been killing innocent Muslim citizens who did not comply with all their views. Needless to say, it is not easy to maintain the support of common people when they are frequently the target of one's own attacks. Therefore, the notion that JAS has survived for so long due to its ideological and popular support approaches can be ruled out. However, the same cannot be said about ISWAP, who initially split from JAS due to the latter indiscriminately targeting Muslim civilians. ISWAP has chosen to pursue a more people-centric approach, aiming to win over the hearts and minds of the population instead of terrorising them into submission. Nevertheless, it is difficult to find statistics on the approval ratings or recruitment counts of JAS or ISWAP, but as previous conclusions in this article have shown, the ISWAP faction was more successful in both regards.

As for the military pillar, it seems to be the primary factor keeping JAS alive when compared to other pillars. As previously stated, the military tactics of Boko Haram have shifted from favouring open engagements against state forces to more covert operations such as suicide bombings and assassinations,

making the insurgency return to a stage similar to its pre-expansion phase before 2014. Nevertheless, the insurgents remain dangerous due to their smart usage of captured arms and equipment, their limited but nevertheless, existent training, and their coordinated and planned attacks. Therefore, while conventional tactics remain a useful tool the group may employ at times, their operations nowadays are primarily unconventional and rely predominantly on kidnappings, bombings and infiltration tactics.⁷

When looking from a theoretical perspective, the limited success of JAS can be directly attributed to its overall approach to revolution, which is flawed. Similarly to the theory of Focoism, JAS saw polarization and exclusivism as proper ways of dealing with the population. This approach has now, after many years, seemingly come back to negatively impact the jihadist faction in the long term, showing itself to not be the most sustainable. Similarly, the actual Foco theory was very limited in terms of success, being only applied in the lone case of the Cuban revolution and failing miserably abroad, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Bolivia (Sinclair, 2022). The faction of ISWAP, on the other hand, through a revolutionary warfare approach more in line with the ideas of Mao Zedong, managed to largely maintain a healthy amount of popular support through a more population-centric approach. The ideas of Mao also seem to hold more credibility in comparison to Foco theory, as Mao was facing a well-coordinated and conventional Japanese army, whereas Guevara faced off against an already weak and unstable government. The ideas of Mao were successfully applied in China, and (while there is no proof that ISWAP was basing their approach upon Maoist principles) some of these ideas also saw success in the case of ISWAP's jihadist insurgency.

To summarize, Boko Haram remains a potent and active threat to their region, largely thanks to the complicated nature of their insurgency. When it comes to the faction of JAS, it seems like it is on the verge of complete collapse, only managing to keep itself afloat through a careful guerrilla approach and its notorious covert tactics such as suicide bombings or kidnappings. ISWAP, on the other hand, has risen from its state of being the smaller faction in 2016 and has largely tried to remain unnoticed throughout its slow expansion. The ISWAP we see nowadays is a well-armed, well-coordinated and sophisticated military threat that has managed to balance each pillar of revolutionary warfare largely in its favour. The group has not only chosen to approach local populations in a friendly manner, it has also managed to create symbiotic economic ties with them, rendering the insurgency more resilient. Finally, military tactics play the main part in making the insurgency what it is in the first place. Through its effective usage of highly mobile motorised infantry assets in

well-coordinated, timed and unexpected attacks, Boko Haram has proven to be a worthy challenger to the bigger and better-equipped Nigerian forces. While COIN efforts were successful in pushing back Boko Haram and making it shift from the offensive stage of operations to a guerrilla warfare stage, the group has used this to its advantage, further destabilising the environment of Lake Chad and making COIN forces suffer losses in a protracted and seemingly endless low-intensity war.

Conclusions

1. As pointed out in scholarly literature, revolutionary groups tend to be more resilient than other types of armed struggles; therefore, the theoretical approach of revolutionary warfare enables the possibility of explaining the reasons behind the protracted survival of contemporary jihadist groups that operate similarly to revolutionaries. The Focoist and Maoist approaches to revolutionary warfare differ primarily in their perceptions of the acceptability of violence in attaining popular support and, to a limited degree, their military approaches. Therefore, the Focoist approach was linked to JAS and the Maoist to ISWAP to portray the similar nature in which these two branches and factions contradict one another and their comparatively different levels of success. Naturally, this means that there cannot be one unified answer to the question, “what factors contributed the most to the prolonged survival of Boko Haram?” Instead of basing ourselves purely on successes, the group’s failures ought to be addressed, too.

2. Various factors may have contributed to the prolonged survival of Boko Haram, and it is safe to say that the complex operating nature of Boko Haram certainly is one of the reasons behind its protracted survival. Boko Haram has proven to be a sophisticated insurgency that shares many features with historical examples of revolutionary movements. When examining the operational nature of Boko Haram, three primary pillars can be discerned:

a. The ideological pillar. The group maintains a strict Salafist perception of Islam, meant to ‘purify’ the Muslim population, with the faction of JAS choosing to base itself upon an overall more exclusivist and violent perception of certain principles in comparison to ISWAP. Overall, this aspect is closely tied to the pillar of popular support and, to a limited degree, compliments it in the background of sustaining (ISWAP’s) or decaying (JAS’) survival;

b. Popular support. JAS, because of their low governance efforts and violent ways of persuading people to join, has failed in building a strong link with the population, and ISWAP, choosing a more population-centric and

economically sustainable approach, has succeeded in bolstering its survival;

c. The military pillar. Both factions operate in similarly complex manners, with the main difference being their primary choices of targets (JAS – civilian, ISWAP – governmental). The military strategy of Boko Haram as a whole has shifted from favouring open engagements to utilising more unconventional tactics and has helped the group mature into a more sophisticated military threat that is harder to address. Therefore, the military aspect of Boko Haram’s operations contributes greatly to the protracted survival of the group.

3. Due to continuing attacks and the group’s capability to occasionally challenge and defeat conventional military forces in combat through their sophisticated use of battlefield formations and well-coordinated tactics, the primary contributing pillar to Boko Haram’s protracted survival can be identified as the military pillar. However, while this statement may hold truth when talking about Boko Haram as a whole, it does not consider its two different factions. JAS has clearly shown lacklustre performance in building and maintaining popular support, as well as shaping its ideology to complement the aforementioned pillar. Therefore, the primary logical pillar contributing to this faction’s survival is its military approach. However, ISWAP has proven itself to be the more lenient faction, choosing to adopt more sustainable approaches toward growing its popularity and governing occupied lands. Because of this, in addition to its sophisticated military tactics, ISWAP’s prolonged survival and its overall greater success appears to also be backed up by the faction’s more sustainable strategy in the pillar of popular support.

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Notes

- 1 The data collected in this article mainly qualitative but also quantitative (as statistics have to be listed in order to show the successes of each party in more detail). The majority of the data is secondary, retrieved from the products of numerous researchers. Therefore, the methods used to analyse such data are literature review and qualitative content analysis.
- 2 This statement is made in reference to the increasing attention from European countries towards migration from the Sahel region and the subsequent policies put forth by EU member states in order to control migration. Retrieved from: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/sahel-europes-frontier-zone-african-migrants-29307>
- 3 For instance Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos argues that Boko Haram can be seen as more of an uprising, than a terrorist group due to its grassroots, origin and operational practices. He further mentions that only its more violent faction can be referred to as being terrorist-like.
- 4 Boko Haram, being an ISIS affiliate was supported by them through training, ideological guidance, and monetary support.
- 5 The S⁴ Data Set divides “significant” losses of equipment into three categories with each specifying the amount of either weapons, rounds of ammunition or technicals (armoured vehicles) lost.
- 6 Boko Haram has captured a wide range of equipment throughout the years. While the exact numbers of each weapon system or vehicle may be unknown, the group’s arsenal is clearly diverse, as shown in table 2, which only covers heavy systems.
- 7 It is also important to note that JAS has been nearing complete collapse as of late. Due to the death of their leader, Shekau, in 2021 at the hands of ISWAP, the group had further splintered, with many members either surrendering to Nigerian authorities or joining ISWAP (Husted, 2022). Nevertheless, there are remnants of JAS that are still active in the northeast of Borno state, therefore, their defeat cannot be truly announced.