1.1.3. Non-state armed actors

1.1.3. Non-state armed actors

a) Boko Haram

Since 2016, there have been two main distinct factions of Boko Haram – the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) – with considerable differences in their *modi operandi*.97

Fighting between these two factions has continued during the reporting period.98 Both groups have strengthened their hold over their respective territories, and the frontline between them appears to have largely stabilised.99

For information on developments pertaining to these factions prior to mid-2024, including territorial control, see section 1.3.2 Non-state armed actors of the EUAA COI Report – Nigeria: Security Situation, June 2021 and section 2.4.2 Non-state armed groups of the EUAA COI Report –Nigeria: Country Focus, July 2024.

ISWAP - Sources variously estimated that ISWAP had between 4 000 and 7 000100 or even 8 000 to 12 000 fighters within its ranks.101 As of late 2024, the group's operations were limited to Borno and Yobe states.102 Its leadership structure involves a *shura* (advisory council). *Shura* consists of a number of senior commanders and clerics who must be consulted in key decision-making matters,103 overseeing the group's strategy, approving appointments to positions of command, and ensuring ideological conformity.104 The group has split its territories of operation in northeastern Nigeria into *wilaya* (provinces), which are further subdivided into several *mantiqa* (districts). A *mantiqa* is commanded by an *amir-ul mantiqa* (district head) who reports to the ISWAP's leadership.105

As of mid-2025, there were said to be three *wilaya*: Buhaira (on the fringes of Lake Chad), Faruq (covering southern Borno, southern Yobe and northern Adamawa), and Krenowa (comprising areas of northern and central Borno).106 Vincent Foucher, a political scientist specialised in security issues in West Africa,107 pointed to sources indicating that ISWAP had strengthened its presence outside of the North-East since the 2021 death of Abubakar Shekau108 who led the rival faction JAS (often referred to as Boko Haram).109

ISWAP's attacks mainly targeted the military forces.110 While the group also considered Christian communities as legitimate targets for its attacks, it sought to regulate its relations with Muslim communities on whom it imposed levies to maintain its standing armed fighting force. ISWAP has set up standardised military units, strengthened internal surveillance, and intensified

its use of information technology.111 Thus, the group has made effective use of technology to increase its appeal among young people and drive its recruitment efforts, spreading jihadist propaganda and justifying killings in TikTok videos.112

During its operations against positions of government forces in the first half of 2025, ISWAP gave evidence of using new military tactics113 as it adapted to the government's 'super camp' 114 strategy,115 including through the deployment of motorcycle-mounted combat units,116 rapid assaults using light weaponry, nighttime raids,117 near-simultaneous attacks at different places,118 attacks on strategic roads and bridges, and diversionary attacks to prevent the arrival of government reinforcements.119 Moreover, since December 2024, the group has used drones to conduct attacks,120 rather than merely employing them for surveillance/ intelligence gathering121 and propaganda purposes.122 Following its successful overrunning of multiple military bases in Borno, researchers Malik Samuel and Ed Stoddard held that ISWAP had expanded its geographical scope and acquired the capability to attack 'any location' in the state, including garrison towns.123

JAS (Boko Haram) - JAS also remained active.124 As of mid-2024, the group controlled several separate enclaves in Nigeria, including its main territory on the Lake Chad islands and Gwoza Hills near the Nigeria-Cameroon border. JAS also maintains at least one enclave outside the North-East, located in the hills near the Shiroro Reservoir in Kaduna State (North-West). The current top leader (*imam*) of JAS is Ibrahim Bakura Doro, also known as Bakura Buduma. Estimates on the number of JAS troops are particularly difficult to determine, as the organisation of its forces is much less structured compared to ISWAP, lacking standardised unit sizes. To gather resources, the group continued to resort to plunder and kidnap residents for ransom in the areas under its control, including Muslims. However, it has also started to tax residents in its Lake Chad enclave.125 Although JAS primarily targeted civilians, it has continued to pose a threat to the military. Attacking military posts remained one of the group's main methods of replenishing its arsenal.126

b) Other Islamist armed groups

Lakurawa - Insurgents with suspected127 links to Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), locally known as Lakurawa, have been operating in northwestern Nigeria's Kebbi,128 Sokoto129 and Zamfara states. Described as a violent jihadist group, Lakurawa became a high security concern in northern Nigeria in 2024. Its fighters are believed to have crossed into Sokoto State from the Niger Republic in 2018.130 Its members have assaulted villages in both Nigeria and Niger and were believed to hold territory in several villages, where they levied taxes.131 After the Lakurawa killed 15 people in an attack on Mera village in Kebbi State in November 2024,132 authorities began a counterterrorism campaign in December 2024133 and designated the group as a terrorist organisation.134 The military campaign against Lakurawa continued in 2025, albeit at a less intensive pace.135

Ansaru and **Mahmuda** – Other Islamist insurgent groups in Nigeria include Ansaru - an al-Qaeda-affiliated network primarily based around the Kainji National Park between Niger and Kwara states136 - and Mahmuda (also referred to as the Mallam Group after its leader), a newly emerged group that also operates in the same area137 and is believed to be a Boko Haram splinter faction.138 For more information on Mahmuda, please see section 2.1.4 Kwara.

c) Pro-Biafran separatist groups

Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) - IPOB is a secessionist group striving for the restoration of the now-defunct Republic of Biafra.139 It was designated by the Nigerian government as a terrorist organisation and banned in 2017. The group's supreme leader Nnamdi Kanu was arrested and detained in 2021.140 Since then, IPOB has been implementing a sit-at-home order across the South-East initially designed as a weekly protest calling for the release of its detained leader Nnamdi Kanu. Compliance with the weekly shutdowns have been enforced by armed men 141 known for resorting to coercive tactics such as looting, arson and targeted assassinations. 142 Meanwhile, there has been a recent shift away from armed violence in IPOB's messaging, assessed to be a 'more tactical than an ideological shift'.143

Eastern Security Network (ESN) - ESN is IPOB's paramilitary wing,144 and it was created in December 2020 to protect Igbos from attacks by armed men (including Fulani herders).145 ESN launched a campaign targeting Fulanis in the forests of the South-East. Over 2024, the campaign reportedly dislodged more than 70 Fulani herders and criminal settlements in these areas.146 It also engaged in clashes with security forces, often conducting guerrilla-style attacks against police and military installations.147 As of mid-2025, ESN's strength was unknown. A Nigerian senior security advisor told EUAA in July 2025 that the security forces had killed many ESN commanders and members since 2023 and that attacks on security personnel had declined in frequency and fatalities since late 2024.148

Biafran Republic Government In Exile (BRGIE) and the **Biafran Liberation Army (BLA)** - Meanwhile, a rise in violent activities in the South-East since 2023 has been attributed to fighters linked to Simon Ekpa, a Finland-based agitator and self-acclaimed disciple of Kanu who that year announced the creation of the so-called Biafran Republic Government In Exile (BRGIE) and the Biafran Liberation Army (BLA).149

For more information see also 2.9.1. Treatment by authorities of pro-Biafran separatists and perceived pro-Biafran supporters and 2.9.2. Treatment by pro-Biafran armed groups of Igbos perceived as non-supporting the cause in EUAA COI Report – Nigeria Country Focus, November 2025.

d) Farmers and herders

While the conflict between farmers and herders was resurging over the first half of 2025, there was disagreement over the nature and categorisation150 of this complex and under-researched phenomenon.151 Some observers linked the clashes to pressures on herders induced by climate change152 and competition over ever-dwindling resources,153 while others labelled the violence as manifestations of organised criminality led by armed groups154 or terrorism. Yet others have traced the violence to religious differences between the mostly Muslim herders and largely Christian farming communities, or to disputes between herders and farmers over land use.155 For more information see 1.2.2 Intercommunal conflicts, including between farmers and herders.

e) Bandits/criminal groups

Bandits are characterised by fragmentation and diversity in their capabilities and levels of organisation.156 Some observers noted that the labelling of banditry as ‘organised criminals’, ‘unknown gunmen’, or ‘terrorists’ has created challenges in understanding the complex nature of this phenomenon. Bandit groups are described as diverse, mobile, and economically motivated. Their violence disproportionately affects men through killings and women through sexual assault, while the frequency and intensity of attacks continue to rise. Despite receiving limited attention compared to the insurgency in the North-East, in recent years banditry violence has surpassed that perpetrated by groups like Boko Haram.157 For more information see 1.2.3. Banditry and kidnappings.

f) Cult groups/armed gangs

Numerous violent armed gangs originated as university confraternities (or cult groups) in southern Nigeria between the 1960s and the 2000s. These include Black Axe158 (also known as Aiye), the Supreme Eiye Confraternity, the Supreme Vikings Confraternity, the Buccaneers159 (Alora Sea Lords),160 the Maphite, Deygbam and Deywell,161 and ‘waterfront gangs’ of the Icelanders and Greenlanders162 primarily operating in Rivers, Edo, Delta and Bayelsa states.163 Few of these groups, with the exception of Black Axe, have sought to recruit new members outside their established homebases in the south.164 While these groups are well-known, the most recorded incidents of lethal violence were linked to unidentified gangs.165

Black Axe is an organised criminal group running cells in numerous countries. In Nigeria, where it is often perceived as synonymous with its legal parent group, the Neo-Black Movement of Africa (NBM), Black Axe is notorious for its violence and brutality. Its members, active in cities like Lagos, Port Harcourt and Benin City, regularly engage in kidnapping, extortion, smuggling and drug dealing while competing with rival gangs (e.g., the Maphites, the Eiye and the Vikings) over territory. Like other gangs, Black Axe recruits new adherents from secondary schools and universities166 and enforces permanent membership.167

The Maphite gang was dominant in Edo State, while Deygbam, Deywell and Icelanders were the dominant groups in Rivers. The Vikings were strongly established in Edo and Delta states. As of mid-2025, SBM Intelligence has identified three main gang rivalries: a fierce battle between Black Axe and Eiye’s over control of the Lagos underworld; the Vikings’ active resistance to Black Axe’s attempts to expand in the South-East and the South-South; and a deadly rivalry between local Icelanders and Greenlanders in Rivers State.168 For more information see 1.2.3. Violence linked to criminality, gangs/cults and separatism in the Niger Delta.

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