SITUATION ANALYSIS BRIEF

INSURGENT ACTIVITIES IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA:
2019 ELECTIONS
OUTLINE

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SUMMARY

As the 2019 General Elections of the Federal Republic of Nigeria drew close, the Conflict Studies And Analysis Project at the Global Initiative For Civil Stabilisation began a project to collate and examine attacks by both the Islamic State’s West African Province and Jamaa’atu Ahlis-Sunnati Lid-Da’wati Wal-Jihad seeking to disrupt and interfere with the polls.

With the conclusion of the Presidential and National Assembly polls, attacks around the period from 4th February 2019 to the very day of the polls, 23rd February 2019, that were verified and sources with knowledge of how they unfolded interviewed, are presented in this briefing note.

Between 4th February 2019 to 23rd February 2019, in a span of 19 days, there were 22 ISWAP attacks, 12 Boko Haram attacks, and 1 confirmed joint attack carried out by both groups, with 4 Nigerian Army bases overrun by ISWAP in this period, and some 15 patrols and convoys ambushed and destroyed in the same time frame.

More than 200 civilians including campaign rally attenders, displaced persons either going to vote or returning from areas polling units were set up, and adhoc staff of the electoral commission, were ambushed and abducted during this 19-day period.

Due to restrictions faced during the process of collating data for this report, and occasioned by the chaos and fog of war, we couldn’t with strong certainty ascertain how many soldiers, insurgents and civilians died in this period.

However, an estimation going off the data, we were able to credibly verify relating to casualties (which did not cover the period and locations completely), would point towards:

1. Around 100-110 soldiers killed
2. A slightly lower number of insurgents killed, or 90-100 insurgents (as throughout this period, the insurgents were on the offensive and dictating the pace and place of battle).
3. And at least 120 civilians killed
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**ISWAP:** Islamic State’s West African Province

**BH:** Boko Haram aka Jamaa’atu Ahlis-Sunnati Lid-Da’wati Wal-Jihad

**CJTF:** Civilian Joint Task Force, a pro-government militia

**INEC:** The Independent National Electoral Commission

**SPBIED:** Suicide Person-Borne Improvised Explosive Device
BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

On Saturday 23rd February, 2019, the Nigerian Presidential and Federal Parliamentary Elections, were finally held.

Although, the elections were initially scheduled for Saturday the 16th of February, however, with only a few hours before the polls would have opened by 8:00AM, the Independent National Electoral Commission, Nigeria’s elections authority, postponed the polls by a week, citing logistical challenges.

However prior to the elections, the Conflict Studies And Analysis Project at GICS team, began tracking developments around the insurgent organisations in North-east Nigeria, related to the elections. This work which is still ongoing, will also cover the Governorship and State Houses of Assembly Elections, which will hold 9th March 2019.

In conducting the research for this brief, reliance was mostly placed on primary sources of information. With some fieldwork being conducted in insurgent controlled/contested territories in Nigeria and the Republic of Niger.

For every attack documented for this project, effort was made to talk to ISWAP-affiliated persons[1], so-called Boko Haram-affiliated persons, and non-affiliated civilians in difficult to access/contested areas. This is in addition to interviews conducted with sources within the Nigerian military, intelligence and security services establishment focusing on the conflict in the Lake Chad region.
As the period for elections into various political offices in the Government of Nigeria, and the various state governments drew closer, the Islamic State’s West African Province and Jamaa’atu Ahlis-Sunnati Lid-Da’wati Wal-Jihad launched information campaigns in settlements across Northern and Central Borno, Yobe and parts of Northern Adamawa, to dissuade people living in areas they do not have full control from participating in the elections process.

Warning that participation in democracy is tantamount to embracing disbelief and apostasy. The campaigns by both insurgent organisations began from the last week of December 2018, intensify in the last weeks of January 2019, before largely stopping by the middle of February.

From the eight of February 2019, an intensification of attacks on military bases across the lower part of Northern Borno, and the upper part of Central Borno, along with ambushes and attempted ambushes of security forces patrols in Yobe State, was noticed.
ATTACKS

4th February 2019

Jamaa’atu Ahlis-Sunnati Lid-Da’wati Wal-Jihad fighters attacked Nigerian Army units in Shuwa, Madagali and advancing as far as Bazza, all in Adamawa State, before withdrawing when Nigerian Air Force attack aircraft arrived on scene. Two days prior to this attack, the group generally referred to as Boko Haram had sent messages to residents of these towns warning them against participating in the elections, and promising to pay them pre-election “visits”[2].

ISWAP forces overran a Nigerian Army forward operating base at Kanamari, Borno State, burning down the base and emptying it of man-portable heavy weapons, assault rifles, and ammunition.

7th February 2019

ISWAP forces attacked the Nigerian Army base at Malam Fatori, killing a dozen soldiers and injuring others[3].

8th February 2019

ISWAP forces attacked the Nigerian Army bases at Malam Fatori and Ngwom, Borno State, overrunning the base at Ngwom and carting away ammunition and vehicles.

Prior to the attack on Ngwom, ISWAP propaganda had targeted civilians in the area, promising to destroy the base. And after the attack ISWAP circulated messages in the area warning those that intended to travel to places where voting would take place later in the month, that the Nigerian Army will not be able to protect them[4].

10th February 2019

ISWAP ambushed a patrol at Buni Gari, Yobe State, killing 3 Nigerian soldiers, capturing 3 more, and injuring eight others in a follow up bombardment of the Nigerian base in the town with multiple 81mm mortars[5].
Boko Haram fighters ambushed a logistic convoy and a Nigerian Army patrol on the Gamboru-Dikwa road, killing half a dozen soldiers and destroying several vehicles[6].

12th and 13th February 2019

ISWAP forces attacked the Nigerian Army base at Monguno, utilising at least a company-sized force to hit the base, capturing some mortars, rifles, and ammunition before withdrawing, on the 12th of February.

ISWAP forces attacked the convoy of the Governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima as they were returning from campaigning in Gamboru, Gamboru-Ngala Local Government Area of the state. While Islamic State media would claim forty two persons killed, other sources state at least seventy persons were killed in the initial engagement, while dozens more who tried to flee into the woods, were hunted down and killed over a three hour period[7]. Another 100 persons from the convoy were confirmed captured by ISWAP[8], on the 12th of February.

Although the majority of persons captured were civilian supporters of the Governor who had accompanied his campaign to Gamboru, two are soldiers of the Nigerian Army, and several are police officers attached to his protection detail.

On the 13th of February, BH forces attacked Madagali, Adamawa State, engaging in combat for half an hour with the Nigerian Army units stationed there, before withdrawing when attack aircraft showed up.

14th February 2019

ISWAP forces attacked the Nigerian Army forward operations base at Gajbo, Borno State, routing the soldiers stationed there in a bid to disrupt the supply of voting materials for the elections[9], to soldiers and civilians in the area. Half a dozen ISWAP fighters were killed[10], and an indeterminate number of soldiers died during the confrontation.

15th February 2019

Indeterminate numbers of ad-hoc staff of INEC en route to conduct elections at Dikwa, Pulka and Bama, were abducted by BH forces in ambushes they set along the roads.

At least a hundred displaced persons heading from Gwoza to Pulka to vote were abducted after BH fighters ambushed the convoy of vehicles, killing the CJTF militiamen providing security for the travelers and chasing off the attached military detachment[12]. These displaced persons were supposedly paid stipends by a local politician to risk the journey to Pulka in order to help the ruling party achieve a strong showing in the polls[13].

16th February 2019

A squad sized unit of BH forces attacked Maiduguri via the Jiddari Polo district of the city, including three SPBEID-vest wearing bombers, killing seven civilians.

BH fighters ambushed and killed several civilians at Molai, on the outskirts of Maiduguri.

ISWAP forces ambushed a Nigerian Army patrol on the outskirts of Malam Fatori destroying two vehicles and killing three soldiers, before fleeing as reinforcements arrived[14]

BH forces attacked the Nigerian Army bases at Buni Yadi, using at least a Soviet battalion sized force[15] split into multiple elements attacking from two directions (southeast and west).

Three company sized elements of ISWAP attacked the Nigerian Army base at Gajiganna on the Maiduguri-Monguno Highway, overrunning the base and forcing the Nigerian Army detachment to retreat east[16].

ISWAP and BH fighters[17] jointly ambushed and abducted INEC adhoc staff and civilians returning to Damasak from Dusi, Borno, where they had gone the previous day to wait for the polls.

The party of INEC adhoc staff and civilian voters under military escort, were returning back to Damasak on hearing that the polls had been postponed, when they were ambushed with the soldiers escorting them, fleeing in the face of overwhelming insurgent numbers.
22nd and 23rd February 2019

ISWAP fighters attacked the Nigerian Army base at Zabarmari on the 22nd of February, killing three soldiers before retreating.

ISWAP fired multiple 9M22U Grad rockets[18] using an improvised launch system to fire them tubeless, targeting Maiduguri, the Borno State capital.

A Soviet battalion-sized force of ISWAP forces[19] attacked Geidam, Yobe State, largely putting a stop to the polls in the area, as the Nigerian Army scrambled to prevent the insurgents from overrunning the town. An indeterminate number of fighters, Nigerian Army soldiers, and civilians caught in the battle were killed.

ISWAP forces also attacked Monguno with recoiless rifles and 81mm mortars on the 23rd of February.

ISWAP forces shelled Nigerian Army positions at Goniri, Yobe State, with 60mm/81mm mortar shells.
ISWAP shelled Buni Yadi with 81mm mortars on the 23rd of February.

ISWAP shelled Nigerian Army positions around Damboa, Borno State, with 81mm mortars on the 23rd of February.
Although both insurgent organisations aspired to significantly disrupt the elections in Northeastern Nigeria, they were largely unsuccessful except in Northern Borno and parts of Yobe State where they either hold territory or are heavily contesting territories with the Nigerian Army.

A key takeaway, is that the postponement of the Presidential and National Assembly Elections, had, perhaps unintended effect of foiling planned insurgent attacks aimed at disrupting the elections[20]. Insurgent units mobilising to attack INEC staff escorted by the military or the CJTF, on the roads on the 16th of February, were left disappointed for the most part, as the postponement of the polls, largely removed such targets from the roads.

For BH, a lack of finances to run pipelines and networks dedicated to supporting suicide operations in urban settlements and enough trained SPBEID-vest makers to spare, has hampered its ability to target cities and towns with suicide bombers, thus restricting the options available to it in trying to disrupt the polls. The financial problems for the most reflect the downturn in the Nigerian economy since 2015, which has also reduced the amount of money available in the underground economy.

However, the loss of skilled SPBIED-vest makers and the logistics infrastructure to support such operations in urban areas, stems from the successes of the State Security Service (Nigeria’s internal security agency), which over the years worked tirelessly to dismantle this infrastructure through various task-forces and specialist cells. Plus the split between Boko Haram and ISWAP saw the Abubakar Shekau-led BH lose nearly all its skilled explosive experts, plus its skilled SPBIED-vest makers that were still alive, to the new ISWAP.

Although ISWAP would have loved to hit Maiduguri on election day with spectacular attacks[21], it currently doesn’t have the infrastructure to support complex attacks beyond a single-use, and its attempts to build one largely collapsed in 2018 as the State Security Services exposed and dismantled elements of this network, including IED workshops, arms caches, and support personnel, in Maiduguri and Konduga[22].
Another key takeaway, is the fact that at this point ISWAP and Boko Haram continue to maintain the initiative and control the terms on which this conflict is fought. The Nigerian Army is yet unable to dictate the trajectory of the conflict, and can only react to agendas set by the insurgent groups.

For the forthcoming Governorship and State Houses of Assembly Elections, it is expected that the insurgents will be more prepared to carry out attempts to disrupt the polls, and discredit the Nigerian System of Government in the eyes of local communities. Even if another postponement is done.

While there is still a significant gap between aspiration and capabilities in carrying out complex, spectacular attacks in urban areas for BH (and to a lesser for ISWAP outside Maiduguri), for ISWAP more complex factors guide the thinking on when and how to conduct attacks in urban areas.

Unlike BH, ISWAP does has the finances, and outside Maiduguri it does have the capabilities to carry out spectacular attacks in Nigeria’s largely unhardened cities. However it does not currently, and barring a change in strategic thinking, it will not carry out such attacks, as it and its parent organisation, I.e the Islamic State, have drawn lessons from what haste and spectacle profit an organisation that has not yet achieved absolute dominance in the region, or power parity with external powers[23].
[1] The term insurgent-affiliated person covers alleged insurgent operatives, alleged fighters, persons allegedly within the formal non-military structures of the insurgent groups, and persons with supposedly looser ties with the insurgent organisations who allegedly provide material support to these organisations.

[2] Local vigilantes, non-affiliated civilian sources, and Boko Haram-affiliated sources passed on the messages to this project.


[5] The official Islamic State claim, claimed to have killed three and captured three. Military sources confirmed those figures, and added that eight others were injured.


[7] Multiple ISWAP affiliated sources, and multiple Boko Haram affiliated sources confirmed the attack and the figures.


[9] According to several ISWAP affiliated sources, the group was aware that elections materials were being brought into/through the town on the 13th and 14th and wanted to kill the INEC officials.


[12] Confirmed by BH affiliated, CJTF, and military sources.

[14] Confirmed by two ISWAP affiliated sources, one non-affiliated civilian, and Nigerian Army sources.


[16] According to military sources, when the insurgents struck from the north and west of the base, they tried to egress southwards only to run into a third insurgent element forcing them to retreat east.

[17] According to both ISWAP affiliated and BH affiliated sources.

[18] Rocket specification provided by a Nigerian Army source.


[22] Conversations with sources in the Nigerian security sources. One example known to the public was in July 2018, when 22 ISWAP operatives were arrested across Maiduguri.

[23] Conversation with multiple informed ISWAP affiliated sources.